

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

A KEN HOLT Mystery
By Bruce Campbell

The KEN HOLT Mystery Stories

- 1 The Secret of Skeleton Island
- 2 The Riddle of the Stone Elephant
- 3 The Black Thumb Mystery
- 4 The Clue of the Marked Claw
- 5 The Clue of the Coiled Cobra
- 6 The Secret of Hangman's Inn
- 7 The Mystery of the Iron Box
- 8 The Clue of the Phantom Car
- 9 The Mystery of the Galloping Horse
- 10 The Mystery of the Green Flame
- 11 The Mystery of the Grinning Tiger
- 12 The Mystery of the Vanishing Magician
- 13 The Mystery of the Shattered Glass
- 14 The Mystery of the Invisible Enemy
- 15 The Mystery of Gallows Cliff
- 16 The Clue of the Silver Scorpion
- 17 The Mystery of the Plumed Serpent
- 18 The Mystery of the Sultan's Scimitar

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I the hitchhiker.....	1
II the hitchhiker identified	14
III A fight in the dark.....	23
IV beaten to the punch.....	39
V fenton Is found.....	48
VI outsmarted.....	60
VII the limping footsteps.....	71
VIII the warning.....	83
IX the microfile room.....	93
X the coils of the snake.....	104
XI wet paint comes off.....	118
XII the station wagon again	130
XIII the rands find the trail	142
XIV discovered!.....	152
XV in the cave.....	163
XVI trapped!.....	173

XVII	cobra on guard.....	183
XVIII	over the brink.....	193
XIX	fighting with fire.....	203

THE HITCHHIKER

"Hey!" Ken Holt looked up from the hieroglyphics he was trying to decipher. "If you can't drive better than that, let me take over."

Sandy Allen grinned widely and pulled the red car far over to the right as another raucous blast of sound hit them from the back. He jerked his head rearward, his flaming red hair upright in the wind. "Pardner, when a Greyhound bus wants to pass me, I let him. He's too big to argue with." "I see what you mean. I hadn't noticed it." Ken winced as the huge bus roared past, its exhaust bluing the air. Then his eyes sought the page of copy paper once more. "Trouble with covering a dog show," he said, "is that there are so many dogs."

"The trouble with you covering a dog show," Sandy amended, "is that you can't read your own handwriting." His big hand beat a tattoo on the horn button as he swung the car around a small delivery truck. The Greyhound bus was a thousand feet ahead by now and gaining fast.

2 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"What was the name of that fuzzy little mutt?" Ken asked.

"The one that snapped at you? That was Donna of Fremont Farm. The smaller the dog, the bigger the name, I guess."

"Ain't it the truth?"

"Of course," Sandy went on, "if you want to know about the Doberman, I can—"

"Never mind that one!" Ken interrupted. "One inch more and I'd have been the only reporter at the show without any seat in his pants."

Sandy laughed. "Wait until Pop and Bert see that picture. Maybe they'll decide to get out a special edition of the Advance, with—"

"You mean you photographed my stupendous leap to safety?" Ken sounded outraged, but he was grinning. "I'll bet I broke the international broad jump record that time."

"Your father would have been proud of you," Sandy said solemnly. "Come to think of it, he'd probably be relieved—I would be myself—if you limited your enemies to Dobermans for a while. Some of the people you get us messed up with . . ."

His voice stopped, but both boys completed the thought mentally. Their most recent adventure—the one the newspapers had tagged "The Clue of the Marked Claw"—was still fresh enough in their memories to make them glad they were on a public highway in broad daylight.

"Of course Dad occasionally gets messed up with people—as you put it," Ken said thoughtfully, after a moment. He was remembering, as he so often did, the

THE HITCHHIKER

3

grim occasion when Richard Holt, famous foreign correspondent, had been held captive by a vicious gang. His son had been helpless and alone until the oversized, redheaded Allen clan had become his allies. With their help Ken had rescued his father and solved "The Secret of Skeleton Island." Since that time Ken had been practically adopted by the Aliens. Tiny Mom Allen, huge Pop, and equally huge Bert, Sandy's older brother, were the nearest thing to a family that Ken had known since his mother's death years before.

"And the Aliens haven't been leading what I'd call completely isolated lives either," Ken went on, knowing for the hundredth time how impossible it was to put into words the gratitude he felt toward these people who had made his troubles their own, and their house his home. "Ever since I—"

"Ever hear of newspaper men who deliberately isolated themselves?" Sandy broke in brusquely. Ken glanced at him, but Sandy was staring straight ahead. "You win. I won't say a word."

"That'll be the day." Having headed off Ken's thanks, Sandy was his normal bantering self once

again. "And you'd better figure out a lead for that story, or you'll have Pop and Bert doing all the talking."

"Leave the reporting to me. You've got enough to do worrying about the so-called pictures in your camera." Ken sighed elaborately. "When I think of the money we waste, buying you expensive equipment—"

"My pictures are always good," Sandy assured him. And then added, "Well, almost always." "Especially when you forget to put film in the camera."

4 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"But that saves money," Sandy informed him loftily.

"No doubt. No doubt." Ken was buried in his notes again. "If I could only—hah! Got it!" His blunt pencil stabbed at one of the scrawls. "I kept thinking this said marmalade toast—but it's Marmaduke the Third. That was the shaggy-haired hound that looked as if he hadn't been fed for a month."

"I understand his feelings." Sandy suddenly threw back his head and howled mournfully.

"O.K." Ken put his hands over his ears. "I get it. And we're fresh out of dog biscuit."

Sandy pointed ahead to the roadside stand where the Greyhound bus had already stopped. A moment later he pulled off the road as the last of the bus passengers were alighting.

"Ten minutes!" the driver was bellowing to his fares.

"Don't howl again," Ken said, as Sandy sniffed happily at the odor of food. "You'll be fed in a minute."

They went inside and took the only two vacant seats at the long counter already crowded with bus travelers. In the narrow space on the other side of the counter two young men and a girl were rushing back and forth, trying to wait on everybody at once.

"What'll it be, newshounds?" the waitress asked, pausing briefly before them.

Ken grinned, thinking that Sandy's appetite had won them a reputation in every restaurant within a hundred miles of Brentwood. "Take care of the others first," he said firmly.

"Thanks!" The girl flashed him a grateful smile and hurried on down the counter to draw four coffees for as many bus passengers. But a moment later she was

THE HITCHHIKER

5

back with coffee for the boys. "Just to keep you alive until I can take your order," she murmured.

Sandy's freckled face split in a happy smile. "Thank you! I always say it pays to be considerate," he told Ken, as he spooned sugar with a lavish hand.

"You weren't considerate," Ken said. "You just looked as if you were starving to death."

Sandy took a long swallow. "Good," he pronounced. "Now if we only had a couple of hot dogs to keep this company, we'd be in fine shape."

Ken ignored him. "Who's this Mrs. Chauncey Dev-ers?" he asked, studying his notes once more. "She gets better space on the program than the dogs."

"Mrs. Devers, my uninformed friend," Sandy replied, "is the social bigwig of the county."

"I see. Sort of top dog of the show, huh?"

Sandy closed his eyes as if in pain. "If you don't get invited to Mrs. Devers' garden party, you're finished—absolutely finished—so far as society is concerned."

Ken nodded solemnly. "So the Aliens think they might get invited to the next garden party if they give her dog show a big story. I'll stop complaining then, now that I know this is all in such a good cause."

Sandy grinned. "You've hit the nail on the head all right. It's in a good cause. Didn't Pop explain to you?" When Ken shook his head, puzzled, Sandy continued, "Pop wouldn't go to one of her parties if she begged him, but he persuaded her to give part of the proceeds of the dog show to that hospital-wing fund he's so worried about."

"Oh! So that's—"

A loud-speaker screeched into life, drowning out his

6 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

words. "All aboard! All aboard! Next stop Brentwood! All aboard!"

There was a hasty scramble among the bus passengers, to finish the last bite on their plates, to pay checks, and to stock up on peanuts and chocolate bars from the rack near the cash register. The bus driver stood alertly in the doorway, checking up on his charges as they filed out, and when he sent the last warning through the hand microphone one final passenger swept up his change and bolted through the door.

"I guess that's it." The driver hung the microphone on its hook. "If you find any leftovers, keep them in the refrigerator until the next bus comes through." He waved his hand as he departed, and an instant later the powerful engine rumbled into action and the bus moved back onto the highway.

Behind the counter the three workers let out sighs of relief. When the waitress had caught her breath, she smiled at the boys and came toward them. "Thanks for waiting," she said.

"Some mob," Sandy commented. "How often do you get them?"

"About every hour." She smiled wryly. "There's hardly time enough between to brace ourselves for the next invasion." She handed them menu cards.

Sandy didn't glance at his. "Just a couple of hot dogs for me. And some more coffee, please."

"That'll take care of me too," Ken added.

"Right." She moved off.

"I wish you'd told me before why Pop sent us thirty

THE HITCHHIKER

7

miles to cover a dog show," Ken said thoughtfully, after a moment. "I'm not sure I've got enough stuff here to give the thing a really big splash."

"Don't worry," Sandy assured him. "Just listing the dogs' names will run to nearly a column. And you ought to know by now that if Global News accepts your stuff, Pop will too."

"The stories I've written for Global have had slightly more interesting subject matter," Ken pointed out.

"Don't be so modest." Sandy grinned.

Global News, the international agency for which Ken's father worked, had several times bought exclusive stories and pictures of the boys' own adventures. And although Granger, the New York manager, often referred to Ken and Sandy scathingly as "our foot-loose, screw-loose correspondents," the boys knew he was a friend who could be depended on.

"Of course," Ken said, biting into one of the hot dogs that had just been placed before them, "I'll admit I could do without any more Global assignments for a while."

"You can't exactly say Global gives us assignments," Sandy reminded him. "We manage to get into the middle of these things by ourselves."

"That's true. And I've also got to admit that while a dog show may be dull, it does have one advantage: with dogs you know where you are. Either they bite you or they don't. With some of the people we've run into—" He abandoned the rest of his sentence in favor of a swallow of coffee.

The restaurant door clicked in the silence, and a man

8 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

entered and seated himself on a stool near the boys. He was tall and thin, and his dark suit hung on him shape-lessly.

"Coffee and blackberry pie," he ordered. "And put some vanilla ice cream on the pie."

"Sure." The counterman hesitated. "Didn't you come in on that bus?"

The man shook his head, and the counterman glanced curiously through the front window. The boys' red convertible was still the only car in the parking space.

"Hitchhiked," the man said briefly, in answer to the unspoken question. "How far to Brentwood?"

The counterman drew a cup of coffee. "About twenty miles," he said, putting it down before the

new customer.

"Any busses?"

"To Brentwood, you mean?" The counterman's eyes were still narrowed with curiosity. "There'll be another—I mean, there'll be a Greyhound in about forty-five minutes." He scooped ice cream on a wedge of pie and served it.

The boys glanced at each other and then at the man. There was something pathetic about him—about the way he slumped over the counter, about the way his collar gaped around his thin neck.

"Broke." Sandy mouthed the word silently.

Ken nodded. Poverty and pride might explain his near-rudeness to the counterman, too.

"We'd be glad to take you to Brentwood if that's where you're going," Sandy said, directing his voice along the counter. "We're going there ourselves."

THE HITCHHIKER 9

The man swallowed before he spoke. "That's very kind of you," he said finally. "I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble, but—"

Sandy cut in. "Fine. If you don't mind waiting a minute. That pie looks good," he told Ken.

"After all, two medium-sized hot dogs . . ."

Ken grinned. "All right. I'll have some too—just to save you embarrassment."

Five minutes later they were all at the car, and Sandy was moving his bulky camera equipment to one side of the rear seat to give their passenger enough room.

"Please don't trouble," the man said.

"Might as well be comfortable," Sandy answered. "There—guess that'll do it."

He tipped the front seat forward to let the man slip past it, and as the boys got into the car their passenger settled down deep into the cushions with a sigh.

"Didn't realize how tired I was," he murmured.

Sandy eased the car out into the highway. A moment later, as Ken's hand reached toward the radio, Sandy nudged his elbow and jerked his head backward. Ken followed his glance, nodded, and withdrew his hand. Their passenger was apparently already asleep. Perhaps he had had no place to sleep the night before, Ken thought, getting out his notes.

But five minutes later Ken looked up again. "What's with you?" he asked Sandy. "Something wrong with the car?"

Sandy had slowed down to twenty miles an hour, and then accelerated to over fifty around a long curve. He was looking in the rear-view mirror.

He shook his head in answer to Ken's question. "It's

10 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

that lunkhead behind us. I wish he'd pass. Don't like cars on my tail. Makes me nervous."

"Well then let him pass," Ken said reasonably. "He can't at this speed."

"I did slow down. But he did too."

"Anything wrong?" Their passenger had evidently been awakened by the changes in speed, or the boys' conversation.

Ken twisted around to grin at him. "Not a thing—except that Sandy here doesn't like other cars to use the same road he's using."

Sandy had slowed down once more. "See?" he said.

Ken and their passenger both looked back at the pale-blue sedan a few hundred feet behind, traveling at a speed that matched their own.

"It could be," Ken said dryly, "that the driver is merely a law-abiding citizen. We just passed a sign that said the speed limit here is thirty."

The man in the back seat, settling down again, smiled indulgently at the back of Sandy's head.

"O.K." Sandy grinned sheepishly. "If he wants to follow us, let him. But I think I'll suggest to Pop that he write an editorial on the overcrowding of our highways—befouls the fresh ozone, destroys the scenic beauties . . ." He gestured toward the autumn-red maples lining the road.

They had passed through the small village responsible for the reduced-speed zone, and Sandy increased their pace again.

Ken glanced back and saw that the blue car had fallen behind. He grinned, and winked over his shoulder at the man in the rear seat.

The man smiled, and seemed to make an effort to

THE HITCHHIKER 11

overcome his weariness. "Your father works on a newspaper?" he asked politely, directing his question to Sandy's image in the rear-view mirror.

Sandy grinned into the glass. "My father is a newspaper—the Brentwood Weekly Advance. With some slight assistance from my brother and Ken here and myself."

"Oh! I see. I've always thought it must be very interesting work."

"Oh, it is," Ken assured him. He sensed Sandy's amused glance at his notes on the dog show and added solemnly, "You meet such interesting people."

Sandy's eyes shifted to the rear-view mirror. "That reminds me," he said to their passenger. "As a reporter, I guess I should be asking you if you're a newcomer to Brentwood—I mean, if you're going to be settling down there?"

"Oh, no," the man said. "Just on my way through. I'm heading for my brother's place in Ohio. I've"—he sounded embarrassed—"had a run of rather poor luck. Been in the hospital for a couple of months. So when the doctor suggested rest and fresh air, I thought I might try hitchhiking. Thought I might toughen myself up enough to be of some use on the farm by the time I arrive."

"Sounds like a great idea," Ken said heartily, to cover his own slight sense of embarrassment over their passenger's predicament. "Sandy and I are always talking about hitchhiking to the Coast some day."

The man nodded. "You'll be better at it than I am. I gave out pretty early today. There'll be a place to stay overnight in Brentwood, won't there?"

12 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Sure," Sandy told him, his heartiness echoing Ken's. "There are three tourist courts along the highway, and plenty of private homes that take overnight guests."

"Fine. I thought Brentwood sounded like a good place to head for."

They drove then for some time in silence, until Sandy slowed down slightly and said over his shoulder, "Coming into Brentwood now. Right up ahead is one of the tourist courts. Do you want to stop off there?"

The man hesitated. "How far is the main part of town?"

"Only a few blocks—off to the right there."

"Then I guess I'll go on in, if it isn't out of your way, There's time to look around a little before I settle down—and this ride has rested me a good deal."

"Anything you say." Sandy swung off the highway a moment later. "We'll drop you right at the Advance office," he said. "It's practically the center of town."

Within a few minutes they had driven into the parking lot behind the newspaper office, and Ken was pulling the front seat forward to let their passenger out.

"Thank you very much," the man said a little awkwardly. "I'm certainly extremely grateful for the lift."

Sandy characteristically cut short his thanks. "Don't give it a thought. What's the good of a back seat if we don't use it? Watch that puddle there—it rained hard around here last night."

"Well, I'm very grateful just the same." The man nodded to them both earnestly and then, with another of his thin smiles, walked down the driveway toward the street and disappeared.

"Maybe we should have offered him a little help,"

THE HITCHHIKER 13

Ken muttered, reaching into the back seat for some of Sandy's camera equipment. "A loan, or— But I don't think he would have accepted it."

"I don't either." On the opposite side of the car Sandy was extracting his tripod. "He sounded—" Sandy hesitated, as his fingers closed over something on the floor. A moment later, looking down at the small object in his hand, he said, "I guess we're the ones who've just been taken for a ride."

"What? What're you—?"

"Look."

Ken took the bit of pasteboard Sandy handed him. "Greyhound bus ticket," he murmured, staring at it. "From Newark to Kenshoa Park. Dated today."

"So he did get off that bus," Sandy said. "Why do you suppose he lied about it? Anyone can miss a bus. It's no crime."

"I don't see how anyone could have missed that bus," Ken said slowly, "with a loud-speaker squawking 'All aboard!' all over the place. Unless, of course," he added, "he wanted to miss it."

CHAPTER II

THE HITCHHIKER IDENTIFIED

any thoughts of reporting immediately on their strange hitchhiker were dispelled the moment Ken and Sandy entered the huge room that served as both editorial and advertising office of the Allen-owned and Allen-operated Advance.

Pop, his massive head of graying red hair jerking up and down to punctuate his remarks, bellowed, "Fine couple of newsmen!" He ripped a sheet of paper out of his typewriter and threw it into a wire basket on his desk. "Where've you been? How long does it take you to cover one measly dog show?" He began to tamp tobacco into his pipe with furious jabs of an ink-stained finger.

"Don't mind Pop," Bert said calmly, from the corner where his own typewriter had been beating out a machine-gun sound track. "Mom just gave him his orders and he's sulking. He has to go home early and put on his new suit for the club dinner." Bert winked at the boys and added, "Of course, he's a mite bigger than Mom. Wouldn't you think he could handle her?"

14

THE HITCHHIKER IDENTIFIED

15

Pop glowered at him through puffs of smoke, trying hard to maintain the pretense of anger.

"You two aren't much smaller than I am," he told his sons, "but I don't see either of you standing up to Mom. Or you Ken."

"We know when we're licked," Sandy said. "But you don't seem to learn." He shook his head.

"And you've had almost thirty years."

"Thirty years next month," Pop corrected. "And I'd better remember it." He swung around to face his typewriter again. "Get on that story, Ken. I want to know how much space to save for it." Then he slid a sheet of paper into the machine, and an instant later his blunt fingers were slapping at the keys.

Ken sat down before a typewriter and began to add its clatter to the racket the other two were setting up. Sandy removed his camera from its case and disappeared with it into the cellar where he had a well-equipped darkroom.

Half an hour later, just as Ken was handing Pop his story, Sandy returned and laid three glossy prints on Pop's desk. Pop looked at the top print and roared.

Sandy had caught Ken in mid-air, a scant six inches in front of the wide-open mouth of a Doberman. The expression on the face of the stout gentleman clutching at the Doberman's collar indicated clearly that he was more worried about the dog than he was about Ken's posterior.

"Tubby Gillespie true to life," Pop gasped when he managed to stop laughing. "If the beast had bitten you, Ken, Tubby'd have insisted that you get examined for rabies instead of the dog." He looked up at Bert who had come over to see the prints. "What say? Think

16 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

we ought to use this as an example of our fearless reporters in action?"

"Hey!" Ken protested. "I risk life and limb—"

"Better not, Pop." Bert was grinning, but his voice was serious. "After all, you want Tubby to kick in with a good contribution for that hospital wing."

"I guess you're right," Pop agreed reluctantly. "But I'll keep it around. Maybe someday—" his voice died wistfully.

None of them had noticed the tall stranger who had come in, and was leaning on the counter that divided the room, until the man suddenly cleared his throat.

Pop looked up. "Oh. Good afternoon. Anything we can do for you?" His big bulk moved toward the counter.

"I hope so." The stranger removed his hat and ran a handkerchief over his forehead. Then he took a wallet from his pocket, opened it, and handed Pop a card.

"Andrew Richards," Pop said slowly, reading it. "Private investigator—representing the Security Indemnity Company." He looked at the detective questioningly. "Well?"

"I'm looking for two young men who drive a red convertible." Richards allowed his bright dark eyes to rest momentarily on Ken and Sandy, and then his lean attractive face lightened in a grin.

"And I guess I've found them."

Both boys began to move curiously toward the counter as Pop said, half-belligerently, "What d'you want with 'em?"

"I need some help—some information," Richards said. "I think they can give it to me, if they picked up a

THE HITCHHIKER IDENTIFIED 17

hitchhiker a little while ago at a bus-stop restaurant called the Halfway." He dug into his wallet again and handed Pop Allen a newspaper clipping. "This is the case I'm on."

Pop scanned the clipping briefly as the boys exchanged puzzled glances.

"I remember," Pop muttered. "The Plunket pay-roll robbery. Fenton got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"And seven years in the penitentiary, minus two for good behavior," Richards added. "He's out now—and right here in Brentwood, if"—he looked at the boys—"that's where you dropped him off?"

"Now wait a minute," Pop began. "They haven't said—"

"We did pick up a hitchhiker at the Halfway, Pop," Sandy broke in. "Tall, thin, sickly-looking fellow."

Richards was looking relieved. "Swell," he said. "We can clinch the thing right now. Was this the man?"

He handed Sandy a square of glossy paper bearing two pictures—regulation police side-view and front-view photographs—of the man who had thanked them so earnestly for their help a scant half-hour earlier.

Sandy and Ken both studied it briefly, and then their eyes met.

"That's right," Ken said slowly and half-reluctantly.

"But he said he'd been sick!" Sandy protested. "He didn't look like a—" And then his voice stopped and his eyes met Ken's again. Both of them were thinking of the abandoned bus ticket.

"I know," Richards was saying soberly. "That's his stock in trade—looking so frail and ailing that he al-

18 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

ways wins sympathy. Before he turned to pay-roll robbery he used to be one of the slickest confidence men in the East. But take my word for it. He's a mighty smart operator—one of the craftiest in the business. Always carries fake guns, for example, so that if he's caught on a job he won't be facing any charge except simple robbery. He never uses force; he uses his head.

"I'm still not sure how he managed to give me the slip back there at the Halfway," he went on.

"I'd been following the bus in my car, and when I saw it pull in there, I drove a few hundred feet ahead and parked in a narrow farm lane. I saw Fenton get back on the bus, so I drove on then,

to be ready to check on him at the Brentwood station. The bus was behind me all the time. It didn't stop until it got here, but he wasn't on it. I knew then he'd managed to disappear somehow back at that restaurant." He nodded at Ken and Sandy. "The waiters at the Halfway told me you'd given him a ride. So if you'll just tell me where you left him—"

"I don't get this," Pop said quickly. "The man's served his term. What're you trailing him for?"

"The pay-roll money," Richards answered. "It was never recovered—Fenton refused to talk, you remember—and my company had to make it good. We want that hundred and fifty thousand, and we figure Fen-ton'll lead us to it, now that he's out. We've had him in sight ever since he left the penitentiary three days ago, except," he added honestly, "for this afternoon, and for an hour or two the other day when we lost him in downtown Newark. He's on parole, of course, so he probably won't run the risk of leaving the state—and

THE HITCHHIKER IDENTIFIED 19

until today he's been living pretty quietly in a Newark boardinghouse. He pawned a watch and a couple of rings there for three hundred dollars, and that's apparently all the money he's got, so we figured he'd be heading for the loot pretty soon."

Richards had been talking rapidly, evidently eager to convince the boys as soon as possible that he deserved their help.

"I thought things were coming to a head this morning," Richards added, "when Fenton bought a bus ticket to Kenshoa Park. That's where he was arrested five years ago. But—"

He caught the swift look that passed between the boys, and stopped.

Sandy reached in his pocket, pulled out the stub of ticket, and explained where it had been found.

"He wanted to be dropped right in the center of town," Sandy added. "Said he'd look around for a while before he got a place for the night. So we let him out here in our own parking lot. He walked down the driveway and turned that way." He gestured.

Richards sighed. "I suppose he knows he's being tailed. He's plenty smart enough to figure that out. So he pulled this trick to get rid of me, or any of the other detectives who probably are already out after the five-thousand reward my company's offering for the recovery of the pay roll. I don't suppose," he added hopefully, "that he said anything that might give me a clue as to his next step?"

Sandy told him about Fenton's reference to a brother who had a farm in Ohio, but Richards brushed it aside.

"He doesn't even have a brother. And he's never

20 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

been west of Belville in his life. No, I'm pretty sure he's on his way to Kenshoa Park again, now that he thinks he's lost me." Richards shoved his hat back on his head. "Everybody always thought that's where he'd hidden the money, you know. What are the most likely ways to get there from here—besides the Greyhound bus?"

"There are two local bus lines—or he might have taken a cab, I suppose. Kenshoa Park's about twenty-five miles beyond here," Pop said.

"Better check 'em all, I guess, before I take off." Richards started for the door. "Thanks for everything."

"We'll come with you," Ken said suddenly. "We can show you the bus and cab stations in less time than it will take to find them yourself."

"Fine. Thanks. My car's—"

"We'll take ours," Ken said. "We'll be out in front in a minute." He started for the rear door, pulling Sandy after him.

"Hold on a second," Pop said. "This is a story for us, you know. Belville, where the Plunket factory's located, is in our territory, and we gave the robbery and Fenton's trial full coverage. We'd like the rest of the story too. Will you—?"

Richards had paused impatiently in the doorway. "I'd certainly rather there wasn't a story right

now," he said. "I can't prevent you from printing the news that Fenton's out, of course, but I was speaking in confidence when I told you we were following him."

"I understand that. I just want to be sure we get the facts when—or if—you recover the money. Will you give us a ring when there's any news?"

THE HITCHHIKER IDENTIFIED 21

"Sure." Richards had his hand on the knob. "If I remember," he added with a wry grin. "I might be a little excited when the time comes."

Pop waved him out. "We'll call you." He gestured with Richards' card, still in his hand. "We can reach you through the company."

"You do that," Richards assured him. "Let's hope you get your story and I get Security Indemnity's money." He added to the boys, "I'll meet you at the Greyhound station."

Sandy and Ken piled into the red convertible and Sandy gunned the motor to life. "Anything special up your sleeve, mastermind—wanting to trail along with Richards like this?" Sandy asked.

"Sure." Ken gave him a sidewise grin. "I wanted to get out of the office before Pop let loose on us. Can you imagine the fun he's going to have kidding us—ms, the great detectives, being so taken in by a slick operator that we wanted to loan him some money?"

"Yeah." Sandy's face was suddenly as morose as his voice. "We're going to be a great joke—we are." Then he sat erect. "Richards said there was a five-thousand-dollar reward for the recovery of the pay roll. Pop wouldn't laugh quite so hard if we managed to land that reward ourselves and turned it over to his hospital fund. Five thousand is about five times as much as any other single contribution he's—"

"Take it easy," Ken interrupted. "Something tells me that landing that reward wouldn't be the simplest trick in the world. Fenton's smart, remember."

"He must be." Sandy grinned. "He even fooled us."

"I wasn't kidding. And Richards is a professional,

22 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

with all the background of the case to help him. He even said there probably were other professionals out after the reward. So if anybody manages to track down that loot, I don't think it's likely to be us. Naturally we don't agree with them, but there are people who don't classify our detecting ability in quite the professional class."

"We don't agree with them," Sandy repeated. "But we certainly do give them some pretty good arguments for their side."

They pulled up behind the unobtrusive black car which Richards was parking in front of the Greyhound bus station. An instant later Richards sprang out.

"Won't be a minute," he said. "I hardly think I'll find a trace of him here, but it's better to try."

As he started into the station, Ken got out to follow him, motioning to Sandy to come along.

"You want to watch how a professional operates?" Sandy asked quietly.

Ken ignored the grin in his voice. "I don't think Fenton's left Brentwood at all," he said. "It's my hunch that—" But he let his voice drop to silence as they came to a halt behind Richards, already displaying his photographs of Fenton to the man behind the ticket window.

The ticket seller studied them and then slowly nodded his head.

"Sure, I saw him," he said slowly. "Sold him a ticket to Kenshoa Park for the last bus that left here."

Sandy hastily transformed a laugh into a cough. "Your hunches," he said into Ken's ear, "are definitely not in the professional class."

CHAPTER III

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

richards was mopping his forehead again as he got back into his car a moment after the ticket seller had assured him that he was certain of his recollection; that it had undoubtedly been Fenton who had purchased a ticket for the last bus to Kenshoa Park.

"I told you he was smart," Richards muttered. "You think you've got him figured out and then you find he's already a step ahead. Fenton knew nobody would expect him to get right back on another Greyhound, so that's exactly what he does." He turned his ignition key. "Well, thanks, anyway. I'll get along for Kenshoa Park now. With luck—and a decent speed limit—I may be able to pass the bus. It just left here about twenty minutes ago."

"Don't forget we're going to check with your company for the story on how you make out," Sandy told him.

"Sure. You do that. I phone in regularly, and 111 try to persuade them to give you any dope they get—pro-

23

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

vided you don't use it ahead of time." Richards lifted his hand to them in salute, and swung away from the curb.

"Well, my nonprofessional friend, what now?" Sandy asked, sliding under the wheel of the convertible.

"Why don't you leave the humor to Pop?" Ken asked. Then his face brightened. "Maybe he's already left the office to go home and change into his new suit. If we don't see him until tomorrow morning, he may have forgotten some of the best lines he's been dreaming up to throw at us when we get back."

"We can hope," Sandy said.

But Pop was still sitting at his desk when they walked into the Advance office a few minutes later. The boys stopped in the rear doorway, and Ken moved one step backward. But Pop's voice caught them.

"Now you take me," he said, in a deceptively innocent voice. "I use my wits. Mind you, I'm not saying they're the same kind of problem exactly—foiling a pay-roll robber who's after a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of loot, and foiling Mom who's after me to get into that dratted new suit. But each requires a certain degree of cunning."

He gave his outsize swivel chair a quarter turn. Bert looked up from his desk, where he was reading proof, to wink at the boys. And Ken and Sandy, with a resigned glance at each other, came slowly on into the room.

"Go ahead," Ken said. "We're braced. We should have drowned ourselves—it would have been less painful."

Pop pointedly ignored him. "As I was saying," he

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

25

went on, "each requires a certain degree of cunning. Mom tells me that it is absolutely vital that I leave the office early and change my suit. Fenton tells you that he is a down-and-out invalid hitchhiking to Ohio. Now there are some people who take preposterous statements like those at their face value. Other people—I'll refrain from mentioning names—put their cunning to work. Cunning assures them that it is not absolutely vital to change my—to change some people's—suit. So j—So some people—cunningly remain late in the office, busy at essential tasks."

"What's so essential about this?" Sandy muttered.

Pop swept on, raising his voice to drown out the interruption. "Busy at essential tasks, until Mom—until the enemy, let us say—is outricked. Time runs out. The hour grows late. There is no longer time to change my—I mean, some people's—suit. And thus—"

"Why, Albert, there's plenty of time."

Four heads swiveled abruptly toward the front door, where Mom's tiny figure stood.

"How long've you—?" Pop began, swinging his chair around.

"That is, there's plenty of time if you leave right now," Mom went on sweetly. "I just thought I'd stop in and remind you, in case you had"—she smiled—• "cunningly forgotten. After all, you want to look your best for the club dinner."

"I always think Pop looks his best with a red face," Sandy said.

"After all, when a man has a really cunning mind, we—I mean, some people—don't notice his clothes," Ken contributed.

26 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Traitors!" Pop roared at them. "Traitors—that's what you are!" His fiery glance swept over Bert, whose laughter had joined Ken's and Sandy's. "Traitors—all of you!"

He jerked open a desk drawer and his big hands began to shove papers and pencils and erasers into it, in violent sweeps.

Mom stood perfectly still, watching him, only her bright eyes twinkling. Bert and the boys laughed harder as each wild gesture cleared a new section of Pop's desk.

"If there's some essential task you'd like us to do for you—" Ken offered, between gasps.

Pop glared. "I wouldn't trust any one of you with a really essential job," he said loudly.

A moment later he had marched toward the door, with the martyred air of a man walking to the stake.

"There is just one thing," he said quietly. "I hold you two responsible for the Fenton story. Get it. Call that insurance office every hour—call it every half-hour if things begin to move—and—" He broke off, and his still-red face widened in one vast grin. "And be cunning about it. Use your wits."

He looked down at the woman whose head reached a little higher than his elbow. "Madame," he said, "I am leaving this office in the hands of three complete and unadulterated idiots—because, Madame, that is your wish. And your wish—drat it—is my command."

He grinned down at her and Mom smiled comfortably back.

"You look so nice in your new suit, Albert," she said. "Supper for you boys is in the icebox, all ready," she

A FIGHT IN THE DARK 27

added over her shoulder. "And it seems to me I made a cake this morning, but I had so many essential tasks on hand today, it's hard to remember."

There was silence in the office for a moment after Mom and Pop had departed, side by side.

"Wow!" Ken said at last, quietly. "Talk about cunning—I'd back Mom five to one against anybody."

"Richards' company ought to get her on the job," Sandy suggested.

Ken gave himself a shake. "That reminds me." He moved across the room to the deep shelves that held the back issues of the Advance, bound in large heavy volumes. "We'd better look up the stories you carried on Fenton's case. Do you know what the date was, Bert?"

Bert had already returned to his proofs, and he didn't lift his head. "Check it in the morgue file," he said. "I'm not sure about it."

Ken turned right to the big drawers in which Advance stories were filed according to subject matter.

"You're not going to do that now, are you?" Sandy asked. "It's already six o'clock and I'm—"

"I know. You're hungry. But we've got our orders," Ken reminded him. "And we can make our check calls from the house, if you want to—but not until we have more background dope than we have now. Haven't you got an appetite for facts too?"

"Not always," Sandy admitted. But he joined Ken at the file drawers, and a moment later they were pulling one of the dusty bound volumes down from the shelf.

"April," Ken mumbled, turning pages. "May—here it is." He flattened the page and pointed to a headline:

28 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

PLUNKET PAY ROLL GRABBED IN DARING DAYLIGHT HOLDUP

They bent over to read the two-column story beneath it:

Operating with a smoothness and efficiency that indicated long preparation, a lone bandit yesterday made off with the \$150,000 Plunket Manufacturing Company pay roll. The robbery

took place at 11:30 a.m. as J. C. Campbell, the company's paymaster, left the Belville National Bank with the money in his briefcase.

According to Campbell, the bandit approached him as Campbell was crossing the sidewalk to enter his car, preparatory to returning to the Plunket factory. Campbell was accompanied by H. C. Dolson, Plunket guard and chauffeur. Dolson was armed, but he had no opportunity to draw his gun from its holster.

"I didn't even see the man until he was right behind me," Campbell said. "I heard him say, 'Get in the back of your car and tell your driver to keep his hands away from his gun.' I looked around and saw that he had his right hand in his pocket, and I could see the outline of the gun he held, pointed at me."

Campbell got into the car as directed. "There was nothing else I could do," he told reporters.

"He got in right behind me."

Following the bandit's instruction, Dolson then proceeded down Hill Avenue for three blocks and turned into Grant Street, a one-way thoroughfare running north. Halfway down the first block, the bandit ordered him to stop the car, despite a steady flow of traffic behind. The bandit then picked up Campbell's briefcase and stepped out of the car.

"Keep going," he ordered, gesturing again with the gun still concealed in his right pocket.

Dolson obeyed. But before the car had moved more than a few feet, a "gun" hit the floor of the rear seat with

A FIGHT IN THE DARK 29

a thud. Campbell recognized it immediately as a toy water pistol.

"I knew we'd been fooled," Campbell said, "but I thought maybe it wasn't too late to catch him." He ordered Dolson to stop, and Dolson jammed on his brakes. But the vehicle behind slammed into the Plunket car, throwing Campbell to the floor before he could leave the auto in pursuit of the bandit.

By the time Campbell and Dolson got to the sidewalk several other cars had joined the traffic tie-up, a crowd had collected, and there was no sign of the bandit.

A police cordon was thrown around the entire area within ten minutes, but a thorough search of the neighborhood, and an examination of everyone caught in the net, failed to disclose the thief. The briefcase, emptied of its valuable contents, was discovered in a trash can one block from the scene of the robbery. It bore only Campbell's fingerprints.

Campbell was able to give only a partial description of the man who is now being sought by the police of three states.

"He was about five feet ten," Campbell said, "and wore a dark suit and a blue tie and white shirt. He had a small dark mustache. I couldn't see the color of his eyes because he was wearing dark sunglasses. There was a gray glove on the hand with which he grabbed my briefcase."

Two witnesses claim to have seen a man of that description shortly after the holdup. The first witness, a young woman, declared that she saw such a man at the corner of Devon and Grant Streets, and that he was carrying a briefcase. The second witness, who reported seeing a similarly dressed man several minutes later—and on Devon Street two blocks beyond Grant—said the suspect was carrying a paper shopping bag.

It is believed that the bandit transferred the packages of bills to a paper sack in order to rid himself of the easily traceable briefcase.

30

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBKA

"We've got several leads," said Belville Chief of Police A. W. Harris, interviewed at headquarters shortly after noon. "And we'll show Campbell and Dolson and those other two witnesses photographs of known criminals who have utilized this variety of daylight-holdup technique. If we get an identification, well send out the pickup order."

According to Belville National Bank President, Curt Danzen, the bank retained no record of the serial numbers of the stolen bills.

"They were all small bills, to facilitate pay-roll makeup," Danzen said, "and in such cases it is not customary to list the serial numbers."

Plunket Company officials declared that the pay roll was covered by insurance, and that the company would suffer no loss. Plunket employees are to be paid today, as would have been the case if the original pay roll had not disappeared.

Ken and Sandy straightened up, and Ken rubbed a kink out of the back of his neck.

"Fenton is sure smart," he said slowly. "Or cunning, as Pop would say. He gets the Plunket car into a oneway street, waits for traffic to close in behind it, and then tells the driver to stop. He knew there'd be a jam, and that all he'd have to do would be to walk away. Why, it was as easy as—"

"Except that he got caught," Sandy cut in.

"I know. But I bet it was because of some little thing he couldn't have guarded against. Let's find the story."

The account of Fenton's arrest was in the next issue.

"See?" Ken said, pointing to one paragraph. "He couldn't have guessed about that."

Sandy, reading the indicated lines, agreed.

The story described the quirk of fate which had made identification of the criminal possible after the failure

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

31

of the witnesses to recognize any of the photographs they were shown of criminals previously convicted for similar offenses. One of the witnesses—the young woman who had presumably seen the thief while he was still carrying the briefcase—had told the police that she was an artist, and could draw a reasonable likeness of the face she had seen. Her offer was accepted, and throughout the following night the police had checked her sketch against their entire rogues' gallery file. In the morning the four witnesses were asked to study the six photographs the search had yielded.

They had unanimously identified the wanted man as one Arthur Fenton, who had been charged with fraud several times but never convicted.

Fenton's whereabouts, the police had learned, were unknown. He had recently left the Newark hotel where he had been living, and no friends or acquaintances could be found to give a clue as to his destination.

But "wanted" sheets were quickly prepared and distributed by the police of five states, and shortly afterward a vacationing postal clerk had reported Fenton's presence in Kenshoa Park. Ken and Sandy both grinned admiringly at the clerk's story, obtained by the Advance in Angus McPhail's own words:

"I always look at police flyers automatically," McPhail said, "because I've seen them around for the fifteen years I've been a post-office clerk. I noticed the new one in the Kenshoa Park post office right away yesterday morning, but at first I didn't connect it with the man who was occupying the cabin next to mine. I guess it was because my neighbor didn't have a mustache.

32 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"But when I saw Fenton a few minutes later—though I didn't know then what his name was, of course—I just happened to realize how much lighter his upper lip was than the rest of his face, I remember thinking—just sort of idly, like—that he must have shaved off a mustache quite recently. So all of a sudden I thought of that flyer again, and I went back to the post office and covered up the mustache with a little piece of paper—and sure enough—it was the man I'd been living next door to for three whole days. I tell you, it gave me quite a turn. He'd seemed such a quiet sort of chap.

"I'm not able to tell you anything else about him," McPhail added, in response to a reporter's question. "Fen-ton stayed in his cabin most of the time, as far as I could tell, though I saw him go off one morning with a fishing pole. I'd only seen him close to when we'd pass on the way to the camp store once or twice a day."

"I didn't realize Kenshoa Park was a real park," Ken murmured, as they turned a page to find the follow-up. "I took for granted it was the name of a town."

"It's both," Sandy explained. "There's a small town at the edge of the park, and then there's this big tract of state-owned land—about twenty-five thousand acres, I believe it is. With an inn and a lot of cabins for campers, and all the usual camping stuff. The trout stream is supposed to be good, and there are trails and some caves. Here it is," he added, pointing to the remainder of their story.

They learned that Fenton had visited Kenshoa Park one day late in April, when he had reserved a cabin for himself for the last two weeks in May and the first week in June. The name he had signed on the registration card had been Al Walters. He had then arrived to take possession of his cabin approximately two hours

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

33

after the Plunket robbery had occurred in Beltville, forty miles away.

The police, convinced that he had brought the money with him to Kenshoa Park, had searched his cabin and the surrounding grounds without success. Aided by park employees and insurance company detectives—and hundreds of campers and other visitors, lured by the excitement—the search had continued into the night, and was still going on at the time the Advance went to press. Before Fenton's car could be taken into police custody it had been almost entirely demolished by amateur treasure seekers, and park authorities had complained at the innumerable holes dug in the ground in the vicinity of Fenton's cabin.

"We'll find that money," Chief Harris had declared, "whether Fenton decides to tell us where it is or not." He had added, for the benefit of the press, that he was personally convinced that Fenton was guilty of the crime.

"He's been positively identified by all four witnesses," Harris had pointed out. "And though he says he went there to fish, that pole in his cabin has never been used. Furthermore, Fenton has no satisfactory alibi for the morning the crime was committed. He claims to have been 'taking his time' driving from Newark to Kenshoa Park."

"Poor Chief Harris," Sandy murmured, as they read the last lines of the story. "He certainly guessed wrong that time—about finding the money, I mean."

"It's good to know even the professionals are wrong once in a while." Ken leafed on through the next issues.

They found only two more stories—reporting the

84 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

continuingly unsuccessful search for the pay-roll money—and then the case dropped out of the news until Fenton's trial some months later.

At the trial Fenton persistently proclaimed his innocence throughout the three days of steadily mounting evidence against him, but he offered no facts to bolster his case. And his positive identification by four witnesses—in itself almost enough to convince a jury—was supported by a striking piece of circumstantial evidence offered by the state; minute shreds of gray suede, identified by experts as having come from the gray suede gloves found in Fenton's cabin at the time of his arrest, had been discovered in the catch of the briefcase that had held the pay-roll money. A verdict of guilty had been returned in less than half an hour.

Ken let the book fall shut.

"Got enough facts now?" Sandy asked impatiently. His tone indicated clearly that he feared Bert, who had left some minutes earlier, was busy consuming all the food Mom had prepared.

Ken sighed. "Guess we've got all the facts there are. But we didn't find the one I was hoping for."

Sandy stared at him. "What do you mean hoping for? Do you mean you've been secretly developing a theory about—" He grinned. "Didn't you say just this afternoon that you'd stick to dogs for a while?"

"I didn't make any promises," Ken answered. "And besides, who was it who said, a little while

ago, that if we could get the reward for Pop's hospital-wing fund—"

Sandy looked sheepish. "Well, it just happened to occur to me. But now I'm hungry—my normal sense of

A FIGHT IN THE DARK 35

values has been re-established." He made a few hurried gestures toward clearing the top of his desk. "Well, go on," he said, after a minute. "What's the theory? What's the fact you didn't find?"

"I've already told you—in a way," Ken admitted, grinning at the back of Sandy's carefully averted head. "I've just got this hunch that Fenton didn't leave Brentwood. And—"

"But he bought a ticket," Sandy interrupted.

"I know. But he seems to be a man who can abandon a ticket at the drop of a hat. So, as I said, I was hoping that somewhere in the stories we'd find a mention of Brentwood—some slight connection with this town that might bolster up my hunch. I thought if he'd known somebody who lived here, or had ever lived here himself—" Ken shrugged, banged shut the drawer of his desk, and added, "I'm ready. Come on."

Sandy walked to the far corner of the room, to pick up the leather jacket he'd left there on the last chilly day, and suddenly stopped still in front of a window in the rear wall. An instant later he raised his arm in a silent message to Ken to join him.

"Somebody's prowling around out in the parking lot, I think," Sandy said quietly when Ken was beside him. "I saw a shadow move just—there! Right there! See it?"

Ken's eyes followed Sandy's gesture, past the convertible showing faintly in the otherwise deserted, puddle-marked parking space, to the fence at the far side. Except for dim glints of light in the puddles, the whole area seemed at first a dark square of shadow. But suddenly Ken became aware of a darker shadow, moving slowly along the fence.

36 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Somebody heading toward the car," Ken whispered. "You took the key out, didn't you—and your camera stuff?"

"Yes. Both."

Ken moved quickly to the rear door, with Sandy at his heels. But with his hand on the knob he paused, peering intently through the pane of glass that formed the door's upper half.

The moving shadow they had seen before was still visible. It had left the shelter of the fence and was crossing the open space of muddy ground toward the convertible.

But what had caught Ken's startled glance was the sight of another shadow. This one was edging along the parking area's right boundary—the brick wall of the adjoining building. But, as Ken watched, it came to a halt and melted almost imperceptibly into the darkness. Simultaneously, the first figure reached the boys' car, opened the door, and began what was apparently a frantic search of the rear floor and seat.

Ken jerked his head toward the second figure, and waited until Sandy's nod confirmed the fact that he had seen it too.

"Yours," Ken breathed quietly, nodding toward the wall. "Mine," he added, inclining his head toward the car.

"Right."

Cautiously Ken turned the knob, a fraction of an inch at a time. After what seemed long seconds the door stood a few inches open, and they slipped silently through into the complete blackness guaranteed by the overhanging roof of the building.

A FIGHT IN THE DARK 37

Ken touched Sandy's arm in a signal to run for their respective targets. But before either of them could move, the static scene before their eyes erupted into action.

The murky figure huddled against the wall moved swiftly and quietly out into the yard, in a direct line for the convertible. But within a few feet of it he flung up his arms, flailed them wildly for a moment, and then shot forward and upward before he landed with a thud in the wet mud. One outthrust foot was all but touching the figure of the car searcher, just as the latter came upright

and swung around.

For a moment it was impossible for the boys to tell what was happening. Each man seemed to be grabbing frantically at the other. The mud-covered figure's hands caught at the other's coat, slipped, and caught hold again.

Fascinated, the boys watched. The car searcher was chopping down at the clinging hands with vicious fists. Then he too skidded, and mud flew wide as he went down alongside the first casualty.

But he pushed himself immediately up again, rolling to one side to avoid the still-clutching fingers, and stumbled to his feet. A fraction of a second later he was pounding across the open space toward the driveway leading to the street.

Both boys had started forward. And when Sandy saw that one of the men was clear and making for the driveway, he flung himself around to follow. But his right leg buckled under him, and he went down to one knee.

Ken, close behind him, tried to sidestep to avoid

38 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

charging into Sandy—sidestepped directly into the path of one of the onrushing men. Too late he saw the long outstretched arm thrust toward him. A hand encased in wet sticky mud struck his face with a bone-jarring crash. Ken was thrust backward, stumbled over Sandy's extended leg, and crashed to the ground.

His eyes were still plastered shut, and his gasping mouth full, as he heard swift footsteps on the graveled driveway, followed by silence.

CHAPTER IV

BEATEN TO THE PUNCH

"You all right?" Sandy muttered, getting to his feet and grabbing Ken's arm.

"No." Ken's voice was thick with mud and self-disgust. "Wouldn't you think I'd know how to avoid a straight-arm, after years of football? No bones broken, if that's what you mean," he added. With Sandy's help he hauled himself to his feet. "How about you?"

"I'm O.K. But if I hadn't slipped on that turn and been in your way—"

"We were neither of us very bright," Ken broke in. "If we hadn't—" He was wiping his hand across his face, removing the top layer of mud.

"You don't look very bright, I will say that." Sandy grinned involuntarily at the sight of him.

"That's the blackest mud I ever saw."

"And the most adhesive." Ken tried to shake from his hand the gobs he had just taken from his face. "Did you get a look at either of those guys? Could you recognize them?"

Sandy was pawing at the mud on his clothes. "No—"

39

40 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

to both questions. I had the feeling that the one by the car was about Fenton's build—he was tall and thin."

"That's what I thought. Besides, who else would be snooping around the car? If he suddenly realized he'd lost his bus ticket—"

"Too bad we don't have a sample of his footprint," Sandy broke in, "or we could check." He gestured toward the edge of the muddy area, where, beyond the section that had been churned by several falls, footprints showed clearly.

"Hey!" Ken stopped scraping at the mud on his face and got the flashlight from the car.

In its brilliant beam the prints leaped to new life.

"There're two perfect handprints over there," Sandy said, pointing. "Not that we could get fingerprints from them, or anything."

Ken bent over the spot Sandy indicated. "Never mind fingerprints. Look at the impression of the third finger on this one."

Sandy bent down too. "What's that sharp rectangle at the base of it?"

"It looks like a big seal ring—with the seal turned around into the palm, so that it showed when his hand came down flat in the mud."

"It could be," Sandy agreed slowly. Then his voice quickened. "Maybe I'd better photograph it." "Oh, you and your—" Ken stopped. "Why not? Even if one of those men was Fenton, we don't have any idea who the other one was. A ring might help us to identify—" He looked down at the print in the mud again. "But do you think you can? Seems to me even a master photographer like—"

BEATEN TO THE PUNCH 41

But Sandy had already started back toward the office. "I'll be able to tell when I look at it through the ground glass," he called back.

Ken was absent-mindedly tugging at the mud caking his hair when Sandy hurried back. The redhead was carrying a load of equipment and unreeling a long extension cord which he had attached to an indoor outlet.

"I can't believe that the second man was Richards," Ken said, as Sandy deftly set up his tripod and fastened his large camera in place directly above the curious print. A moment later two lights were clamped to the tripod legs, and when Sandy snapped them on, the entire yard was lighted by the reflected glow.

"Why not?" Sandy muttered, racking the camera down until it was less than a foot from the mud. Then he opened the rear cover and focused.

"In the first place, because he's probably in Kenshoa Park by now. And in the second place, I don't think Richards would have made a dive for Fenton—if the one at the car was Fenton. He'd be more likely to let Fenton alone and follow him. And in the third place, Richards wouldn't jump on us, and even if he couldn't recognize us in the dark, he should have guessed who we were, finding us in our own parking lot."

"O.K. So it wasn't Richards." Sandy's voice had the absent-minded tone that usually indicated he was deep in some photographic problem. "Want the entire hand or just the ring?" he asked, his nose pressed against the camera.

"Just the ring, I guess."

Sandy let the camera go still closer to the ground,

42 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBKA

and moved the focusing knob. "This mud takes a beautiful impression—as good as sealing wax," he said admiringly. "I can even see that there's a snake engraved on the ring—a cobra, I'd say. Aren't cobras the things with big hoods?" And when Ken murmured assent, he said generously, "Here—take a look. I've got the image twice the size of the impression itself."

Ken bent over the camera. "Nice going. I salute you, maestro. Proceed."

Sandy slipped in the film holder and set the shutter. "I don't think I care for the owner of this ring, whoever he is. Cobras may have been all right for Cleopatra, but—" He pressed the cable release and the shutter clicked. "I'll take another one just to be sure."

"Cobras are native to India," Ken said automatically. "Not Egypt. Cleopatra's pet was an asp." Suddenly his voice sounded argumentative. "If we're pretty sure Richards wasn't here, and if we've got any suspicion at all that Fenton was, we've got to call Richards and tell him."

Sandy glanced at him curiously. "All right. I didn't say we shouldn't." Then he grinned, "Oh, I see. You're telling yourself, not me. It has occurred to you that if Fenton is still around Brentwood, and we're the only ones who know it, that reward is as good as in our pockets right now."

"Not our pockets. I was thinking of the Allen-Holt wing—for convalescent detectives, maybe. Sounds good, doesn't it?" But he was grinning too, in admission that Sandy had read his thoughts. "You going to print that up now?" he added. "I'll call Richards while—"

"I am not, I wouldn't risk messing up my darkroom

BEATEN TO THE PUNCH 43

in this condition." Sandy looked down at his muddy jacket and trousers. "I just took time to

wash the worst off my hands before, so I wouldn't hurt the camera. We're going home now and get cleaned up."

Ken glanced down at himself, and felt his still mud-caked face. "I guess you're right," he agreed. "Come on. I'll help you carry this stuff inside."

"And of course while we're at the house," Sandy added, opening the back door of the Advance, "we might as well grab a bite to eat, just so Mom's feelings won't be hurt."

"We might as well," Ken agreed. "Outside of calling Richards—and we can do that from the house—I don't know of anything else to do right now, anyway. If we only hadn't been such fools as to let both those men get away."

Bert was taking a plate of sliced ham from the refrigerator when they entered the Allen kitchen.

"Well!" he said, staring at Ken. "Pop always tells us to put our hearts in our work. But I don't think even Pop expects us to put our faces all the way in. What kind of work was it, anyway?" He put the plate down on the table.

"We need food," Sandy said disgustedly, "and what do we get? Jokes."

"Bad jokes," Ken amended.

"What happened?" Bert asked.

"You tell him, Sandy." Ken started for the hall. "If I don't get this off my face now, the skin'll come with it."

Ten minutes later both boys were seated at the table in clean clothes. Ken's face was red from hard scrubbing, but otherwise neither of them was the worse for

44

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

wear. Bert had been brought up to date on the events of the past half-hour, and they had conscientiously tried to reach Richards' New York office—but failed because its line was busy.

"I can see how you masterminds would think that identification of the prowlers was the most important thing," Bert said thoughtfully, "but I think you're barking up the wrong tree. To my mind, the important thing is what was Fenton—or X—looking for?"

"If it was Fenton, I suppose he was looking for his ticket," Sandy said. "Probably figured it would give away his destination if anybody else found it."

Bert shook his head. "He wouldn't be worried about that."

"Look, genius," Sandy said. "Don't sound so smug. If you've got any ideas, let's have 'em."

Bert grinned. "I'm just asking questions. If you're not sure what he was looking for, tell me this: did he find it?"

"Listen to him!" Sandy groaned. "Did he find—?" He stopped at the sight of Ken's suddenly startled face.

"Brother!" Ken shouted, jumping up. "Are we dumb Come on!" He was already halfway to the door.

"Run, children," Bert called after them. "Search the car real well and—" The slam of the door cut off the rest of his sentence.

Ken grabbed the flashlight out of the glove compartment. "Exactly where was it you found the ticket this afternoon? If Fenton lost anything else, it's probably in the same general locality."

"I picked it up about here." Sandy thrust his finger

BEATEN TO THE PUNCH 45

into the beam of light, pointing out a spot on the floor.

But the floor was now perfectly clean.

"Let's try the edges of the seat. He was sitting slouched down, and something might have fallen out of his pockets and slid behind."

They both got into the back and knelt on the seat, to run their hands around its rim. And when that proved fruitless they stood up and tugged the seat cushion forward.

As leather squeaked against leather Sandy suddenly put a hand on Ken's arm.

"Did you hear anything just then?" he asked quietly.

Ken looked at him questioningly, shaking his head.

"Like a rustling in the bushes—over there." Sandy motioned toward the shrubbery near the garage.

Then he shrugged. "Just a breeze, I guess. Hold the light over here." He thrust one hand deep into the far corner behind the cushion and moved it along, inch by inch. A faint grin lit his face and he handed Ken something small and round. "One dime—but I don't think that's what we're looking for."

Ken grinned back. "The Advance said the Plunket pay roll was in small bills. But of course if you turn up a million and a half dimes, maybe we ought to get—"

He stopped, as Sandy began to withdraw his hand once more. Held precariously between his third and fourth fingers was what looked like a rectangle of orange-colored paper.

When he brought it into the light they could both see that it was an envelope of some sort, blank on one side.

46

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Sandy flipped it over. "Looks like—" he began.

Two gloved hands suddenly appeared in the circle of their flash, moving like lightning. One knocked the flashlight out of Ken's hand. The other grabbed the envelope out of Sandy's fingers. Then footsteps thudded across the grass.

"Hey!" Sandy shouted, when he could get his breath. Already he was tumbling out of the car on his side and starting across the lawn in complete darkness. Ken was at his heels.

"I think he went toward the street between our house and next door," Sandy gasped, leading Ken into the space between the two houses. Ken stumbled over the garden hose—which he remembered having absent-mindedly left out two evenings before—and Sandy grabbed at him and pulled him on before he fell.

But when they reached the sidewalk, breathless, there was no one in sight in either direction.

Sandy turned suddenly and started running toward the corner north of the Allen house. When he reached it he came to such an abrupt stop that Ken, pounding along behind him, almost crashed into his back.

Sandy pointed down the cross street's steep hill, falling away below them. Two blocks distant, at the foot of the incline, a taillight winked tauntingly, once, and a car engine rumbled into life.

Then the taillight disappeared as the car swung right, out of sight.

"Coasted down the hill with a dead engine," Ken said. "Didn't start it until he was safely away."

"Bert's right!" Sandy kicked angrily at a stone and watched it skitter down the hill. "We're a couple of babes in the woods. I've coasted down this hill hun-

BEATEN TO THE PUNCH

47

dreds of times myself. I should have remembered—"

He broke off as a pair of blinding headlights, careening wildly down past the Allen house, swung so far over to turn the corner on which the boys stood that it looked as if the car were aiming directly for the sidewalk. Instinctively Ken and Sandy leaped toward the grass.

The car took the corner on two wheels, and raced down the hill.

"Well!" It was more an expulsion of breath than a word. Ken had to swallow before he added, "Did you see what I saw?"

"Did I see it! I practically felt it! They ought to keep drivers like that off the—!"

"I know. That's how you felt this afternoon—the first time we saw that car."

"What?" Sandy stared at Ken and then turned to look after the car, already rounding the corner at the foot of the hill. "Oh!" he said suddenly. "That was—1"

"That's right." Ken nodded. "That was the same blue sedan that was following us on the highway today."

CHAPTER V

FENTON IS FOUND

"why don't you two stop competing for the dunce cap?" Bert looked at Ken and Sandy across the kitchen table. "Ever since you came back in here five minutes ago you've been trying to prove that each of you is dumber than the other." He grinned around a mouthful of potato salad. "Relax. Admit it's a dead heat." "But if I'd listened to Sandy when he—" "But, Bert, if I'd only remembered about that hill!" The shrilling of the telephone cut them both off. It was the operator with Ken's New York call, and a moment later he was speaking to the Security Indemnity Company in New York.

"They're not sure when Richards will call in again," Ken reported, when he returned to the table. "He phoned from Kenshoa Park a while ago. Seems he got in right behind that bus—and that Fenton wasn't on it. Which is hardly news to us. I left word for Richards to call here—that we had some dope we wanted to pass on to him," he added.

"About all the dope we have," Sandy said glumly, "is

48

FENTON IS FOUND

49

that we're pretty sure Fenton was around here a little while ago, but that we don't know where he is now."

"We know more than that," Ken said soberly, spearing a piece of ham and lifting it to his plate.

"The trouble is we haven't had a chance to do any thinking about it."

"Well!" Bert raised his eyebrows in mock astonishment. "You're going to stop punishing yourselves and start thinking?"

Ken grinned briefly. "Start trying to think," he corrected. He swallowed a mouthful of ham. "Do you both agree that it probably was Fenton who was searching our car at the office lot, and that it was Fenton who grabbed that envelope out of Sandy's hand here a few minutes ago?"

"Sounds like an admissible deduction." Bert nodded.

"If we'd only had time to see what was in that envelope!" Sandy groaned.

"You're supposed to be thinking now," Bert reminded him, "not—"

"O.K." Sandy smoothed the disgusted scowl off his face. "We know it was an envelope—a yellow envelope. I'm fairly certain it was the kind photographic shops use for prints and negatives."

"You were holding the envelope. Did it feel thick?" Ken asked. "As if it had several prints inside?"

Sandy concentrated and then shook his head. "No. It felt flat—and too light to contain more than one or two prints at most. Or one or two negatives maybe," he added.

'Good. I suppose that's what you call negative evidence—and no pun intended," Ken said hastily. "But

50 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

at least it's better than nothing. Whatever was in the envelope was very thin and flat. We can also conclude, I think, that whatever was in that envelope is mighty important to Fenton. He certainly took enough trouble to get it back."

"If it was so important, why didn't he take better care of it in the first place?" Sandy demanded.

"I can understand a ticket falling out of his pocket. It's small and he might not notice that. But a fair-sized envelope—"

"I think," Ken said slowly, "that that's just what he was doing—taking care of it. I don't think he could easily lose anything that size. Besides, remember where we found it, jammed way down under the seat. I think he pushed it there—and maybe dropped the ticket in the process."

Bert got up and carried his plate to the sink. "I'm with you," he told Ken. "Furthermore, Fenton sounds like too slick an article to wander around losing anything really important."

"But then—" Sandy looked confused.

"Let's take it chronologically," Ken said. "Maybe then we can figure out why he put it there, and then maybe that'll give us a clue as to what it is."

Ken began to tick items off on his fingers. "These are the things we know about Fenton: He left

Newark on a bus for Kenshoa Park and slipped off at the Halfway restaurant stop. He accepted a ride with us as far as Brentwood. He then bought another ticket for Kenshoa Park but didn't use it. He sneaks back after dark to search our car at the office lot, is interrupted, and departs hastily. He—"

"Who interrupted him?" Sandy put in.

FENTON IS FOUND 51

"Wait a minute. Let's take up the rest of the cast later." Ken bent down one more finger. "He comes here to the house to search the car again, grabs the envelope, and runs. And apparently that time he made his getaway in a car."

"Say! That's right." Sandy looked startled. "If he was the one who coasted down the hill, where'd he get the car?"

"Don't hurry me," Ken said. "One thing at a time. Let's see if we can figure out the reasons for some of the earlier moves first. Does it sound logical that he left the bus at the Halfway Diner because he knew Richards was on his tail?"

"I'd say so," Bert agreed. "But apparently he didn't care much whether Richards picked him up again later or not. He let himself be fairly conspicuous at the restaurant and let himself be picked up by a couple of fairly conspicuous characters in a conspicuous red car."

"That wasn't very bright," Sandy said.

"It earned him a couple of hours of freedom in Brentwood," Ken pointed out. "Maybe that's all he wanted. Maybe there was something he had to do in Brentwood before he went on after the money. But what?"

"He got hold of a car," Sandy offered. "And picked up the envelope."

"He got hold of a car—yes." Ken nodded. "But picking up the envelope was necessary only because he'd put the envelope under our seat in the first place. Why did he do that? What happened that made him decide to get rid of it for a while?"

"The blue—" Sandy sat forward excitedly.

"The blue sedan," Ken finished. "Right. Enter two

52 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

more characters—at least I saw two men's heads visible in the front seat of that car this afternoon. Fenton probably saw them, too, when he looked back at it." Ken accepted the cake plate from Sandy and automatically cut himself a piece.

"You don't suppose they're working with Richards?" Bert, leaning back against the sink, offered the suggestion as if he didn't really believe it.

"No. I think Richards would have told us about them if they were. And besides, the blue sedan apparently followed us to Brentwood, even though we lost track of it after a while. If they were working with Richards they'd have reported to him—and Richards wouldn't have had to go back to the Halfway to pick up Fenton's trail."

"Maybe they're friends of Fenton's." Sandy pulled the cake plate back toward himself again.

"Did that look like a friendly act," Ken asked, "the way that blue car went tearing around the corner a little while ago? And if it wasn't one of the men in the blue car who tried to grab Fenton in the office parking lot, then we've got another mysterious character on our hands—and things are complicated enough without that. Let's assume at least for a while that it was A from the blue car who was after Fenton then, and probably both A and B from the blue car who tore after him after he grabbed the envelope. In my opinion," he concluded dryly, "Fenton and the blue-car boys are not deeply fond of each other."

"Besides which," Bert reminded them, "Fenton seems to have worked alone on this whole job. He didn't even have any friends to give him an alibi, you remember."

FENTON IS FOUND 53

"That's right," Sandy agreed. "When the robbery took place, he was dawdling along the road between Newark and Kenshoa Park, he said. I know!" Sandy swallowed cake rapidly. "They're other detectives out after the reward. And right now it looks as if they've got the best chance to

get it," he added.

"Could be." But Ken looked unconvinced. "They're a little rough in their tactics for bona fide detectives, though. And if they are detectives—and therefore interested only in getting the money, and not in harming Fenton—why does Fenton seem to react differently to them than to Richards? Didn't we decide that Fenton got rid of his precious envelope after he saw the sedan?"

"I guess so," Sandy said reluctantly. "But maybe we jumped at that conclusion too fast."

"I don't think so. Look." Ken pushed his empty cake plate away. "Before we saw the blue sedan, Fenton was sleeping in the back seat—or, at least, pretending to sleep. Afterward he got pretty talkative—asked about the Advance, and all. And he managed to get himself brought right to the Advance office. I think he'd decided by then that he wanted to use the car as a temporary hiding place for that envelope, so naturally he'd want to know where he could find the car later. He could have tracked it to the house easily enough when he had to—by looking at Pop's name on the masthead and then using a phone book."

"Envelope, envelope—what's in the envelope?" Bert chanted mockingly, picking up his jacket from the back of his chair. "That's still your problem, boys—except for the other minor questions of who and where are the

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

blue-sedan boys, where Fenton is now, and where he hid the hundred and fifty thousand." Then he grinned at them. "I think you've been doing some very neat deductive reasoning—though, of course, I don't know whether any of it's right or not. I almost wish I didn't have the hospital board meeting to cover tonight, so I could stick around and listen to the rest of it. Good luck, children." He started for the door.

"Bert," Ken said, "would you mind swapping cars tonight? Ours is a little conspicuous, if I may quote you."

Bert cocked his head questioningly. "You going somewhere? I thought you planned to sit here for the rest of the evening, figuring out how you might have earned that pretty reward if you hadn't let Fenton slip away."

"Now listen, you!" Sandy began menacingly.

"I don't know whether we'll go out or not," Ken admitted. "But just in case we get a brain storm." He held up the keys to the red convertible, waited until Bert grinned, and then pulled out his own key ring.

Metal glinted in the air as the two sets flashed across the kitchen, passing each other in mid-flight.

Bert caught the convertible keys neatly. "All right. But be careful of her. Baby hasn't even gone two thousand miles yet."

"We'll be careful. Thanks." Ken pocketed the keys of Bert's new coupe and a moment later Bert was gone.

"Sometimes he overdoes the act of being my big brother," Sandy muttered.

Ken laughed. "By lending us his new car when we ask for it?"

"All right, all right! I know he's a great guy." Sandy got up and began to clear the table. "But what are we

FENTON IS FOUND

55

going to do with it? The car, I mean." Suddenly he swung back toward the table. "Car! Fenton has a car now. If he got it in Brentwood, maybe we can find out where. He's too smart to steal it. . . ." Then his face fell again. "But of course if he borrowed it from a friend, we've got a fine chance of—"

"Wait a minute," Ken said, carrying the plate of ham toward the refrigerator. "A little while ago we decided Fenton probably didn't have any friends. Let's stick with that assumption. Let's say that he didn't borrow it—he bought it."

Sandy turned on the faucet thoughtfully and began to fill the dishpan. "Richards said he pawned some stuff and got a couple of hundred dollars. You couldn't buy much of a car with that."

"Exactly. It would have to be an old jalopy. How many used-car lots are there in Brentwood that deal in that kind of stuff?"

Sandy considered. "Three, I'd say." His hands began to move faster in the soapy water. "Let's go back to the office and get a picture of Fenton out of the files. Then we can make the rounds." He glanced at the kitchen clock. "They won't have closed yet. If we hurry—"

"Maybe we can check by phone." Ken tossed back onto the rack the towel he had just taken down. "It's worth a try, anyway. I'll describe Fenton to them and see what happens."

He started for the hall with the new briskness that had taken possession of both of them.

"Try Brand first," Sandy called after him. "He's the biggest. Then Waxton and then Brier."

Ken returned as Sandy was drying the last dish.

56 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Got it!" he announced. "Waxton says Fenton bought a Hudson sedan—thirteen years old. Black, with a badly dented right front fender."

Sandy flipped the towel up to the rack with a triumphant gesture. But his voice was cautious as he asked, "You're sure you were both talking about the same man? Descriptions can be misleading."

Ken grinned. "I'm sure. Come on." He grabbed up his jacket and started for the door. "Fenton bought the car in his own name."

"What?" Sandy's hand, reaching for his own jacket, stopped in mid-air. He shook his head. "For a man trying to escape detection, he sure leaves plenty of footprints around, doesn't he?" Slowly he picked his jacket up and followed Ken toward the door.

Ken closed the door behind them. "I said a while ago that maybe all Fenton wanted was a couple of hours of freedom in Brentwood. I know it sounds unlikely, but it could be I was right. Now he seems to be doing the same thing he did at the Halfway; leaving a clearly marked trail."

He motioned to Sandy to take the wheel of Bert's car.

Sandy was still looking puzzled as he got in and turned on the ignition with the keys Ken handed him. Then suddenly he turned. "Where are we going?"

"I haven't the slightest idea." Ken grinned. But when Sandy turned off the key again and sat back disgustedly, he hurried on. "I've got a theory—not an itinerary. My idea is that with Fenton apparently so intent on leaving a clear trail, we might be able to pick him up at one of the tourist courts after all. He implied

FENTON IS FOUND

57

this afternoon that that was where he was going. Of course that might have been just a red herring for us to pass on to Richards if Richards caught up with us. Or it might have been the truth."

Sandy shrugged and turned the key once more. "Well, it's worth a try, anyway. We certainly don't have anything else to do. Except," he added, remembering, "wait for Richards to call us back."

"This won't take long," Ken assured him. "And who knows? We might have some real facts for Richards when we do hear from him."

Sandy handled the car gently, taking the first through street that led to the highway.

"We ask for Fenton first," Ken said. "Then, if nobody by that name is registered, we ask for a thirteen-year-old Hudson. After all, how many cars like that do you think there could be in one town?"

"With our luck," Sandy said, "we'll probably discover that Brentwood is currently playing host to an international convention of thirteen-year-old-Hudson own-

99

ers.

But they found no trace of an elderly Hudson—or of Fenton—at the first two tourist courts.

"Only one left," Sandy said, when Ken got back in the car the second time. "And it's that new fancy job—just one long Colonial-style building, divided up into rooms and garages. Doesn't sound very likely to me. It's expensive, and anyway you'd think Fenton would prefer the privacy

of a separate cabin."

Two minutes later he pulled up in front of the handsomely landscaped tourist court. It had been con-

58 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

structed so that it turned its back on the busy highway, and faced a quiet parallel road.

The garages, arranged in pairs, each pair separated from the next by two separate rooms, all had open fronts. Ken looked at them quickly.

"No Hudson in sight. Come on in with me this time. You know the owner, don't you?"

"Dan Jenckes? Known him all my life."

Jenckes, an easygoing, big-boned man of middle age, stared at them a moment and then grinned.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Get thrown out of the house? Need a night's lodging?"

"Not yet. But it wouldn't surprise us if it happened any day now," Sandy told him. "Right now we just want to know if a man named Fenton has rented one of your rooms."

"Fenton—Fenton," Jenckes muttered the name over to himself and reached for the register.

"Drives an old Hudson," Sandy added.

"Oh—that one. Sure. Took Number Six. But if you want to see him—"

"We don't. Not right now," Ken assured him, with an effort at casualness. "Just wanted to know if he was staying here."

"Well, he is that all right. But he went off about an hour ago, after askin' me where the public library was and if it had a micro-something room." Jenckes shrugged.

"Microfile room?" Sandy asked quickly.

"Guess so. Told him I wouldn't know. Never even heard of the thing."

They thanked Jenckes and left as quickly as possible.

FENTON IS FOUND

59

At the door Ken turned. "If it's all the same to you, we'd rather you didn't tell Fenton we were here."

Jenckes grinned his lazy grin. "I don't mind. And I'm not so curious I can't wait to read all about whatever-it-is in the Advance."

"Thanks, Dan. We'll be seeing you." Sandy was at the car almost before he finished speaking. "I don't get this," he muttered, swinging around a corner faster than Bert would have approved. "What would he be doing in a microfile room?"

"Maybe he just likes to practice looking through the viewers," Ken said absent-mindedly, his eye on his watch.

The library closed at nine, and the hands already stood at four minutes to the hour.

But when Sandy swung into Library Street, heading for the stone building now only a block away, Ken suddenly leaned forward.

"Don't stop!" he said a moment later, just as Sandy turned the wheels toward the curb to park.

Instantly Sandy jerked the wheels back, in response to the urgency in Ken's voice. When the car was moving straight ahead again, he asked, "Around the next corner?"

"That should do it. But don't park until I get a good look back." They had gone fifty feet around the corner before Ken added, "O.K. Under this big tree."

Sandy slid the car up to the curb and killed the engine.

Ken didn't wait for his question. "Back there—parked in a driveway right opposite the library," he said, "was our old friend, the blue sedan."

CHAPTER VI

OUTSMARTED

"our friend the blue sedan," Sandy repeated quietly. "Those boys get around, don't they? Who do you suppose they are, anyway?"

Ken shrugged. "Whoever they are, they seem to do a pretty good job of sticking to Fenton. If they're waiting outside the library, I'm willing to admit Fenton's probably still inside." He opened the car door.

"We're not just going to barge right up the front steps, are we?" Sandy asked.

Ken shook his head. "It's so close to nine o'clock we wouldn't even have time to get to the microfilm room before the place closes. I'll just go as far as the corner and watch for him to leave. Keep the engine running, will you?"

Sandy nodded. "This time," he said determinedly, "we're not going to lose him."

Ken had barely reached the corner before he turned and ran back again. "One old Hudson," he said. "Coming this way."

An instant later an old car rattled around the corner

60

' OUTSMARTED

61

and passed Bert's coupe, its flapping fenders and squeaking body proclaiming many years of hard service. The single taillight blinked on and off with every jolt and the exhaust threw out a dense cloud of heavy smoke.

Almost immediately behind it followed the blue sedan.

Sandy slid cautiously out to make a third in the procession.

They saw the Hudson, up ahead, turn left at the corner. The blue sedan turned too. But by the time the boys negotiated the corner the Hudson was no longer in sight, and the blue sedan was swinging right at the far end of the block.

Sandy stepped on the accelerator and the coupe leaped forward.

At the crossing Ken craned his neck. "He's turning into Simmons Street down there," he announced. "Heading back to the tourist court, I'd say."

Immediately Sandy gave the car the gun and went straight ahead to the next corner, turned there, and raced down toward Simmons. Just short of it they stopped and waited until the Hudson came by at its leisurely rattling pace.

Sandy drove straight across Simmons before the blue sedan could reach the crossing.

"That's where he's heading, all right—the tourist court," Sandy said. "I'll beat him there and park somewhere out of sight."

In less than two minutes they had pulled up under a low-branched tree in the quiet street on which the court faced, parking opposite the building and a little beyond it. Sandy shut off the engine just as the yel-

62

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

lowed headlights of the Hudson came into view at the end of the block. It turned into the tourist court driveway and pulled into the garage of room Number Six.

Fenton was clearly visible by the light over the door to his room as he emerged from the garage. He was carrying nothing in his hands, and was wearing the same ill-fitting suit they had seen him in that afternoon. He had just unlocked his door and disappeared inside, and the light in his room had just been turned on behind a slatted blind, when the blue sedan came into the boys' range of vision.

They dropped down so that their heads were not visible, and waited until the car moved slowly past them and finally parked just beyond the range of the tourist court neon sign. Some four hundred feet separated the sedan from Bert's coupe.

Sandy and Ken pulled themselves up again and looked about. All the court's garages were occupied now, and all the rooms were lit. It looked peaceful and quiet, as if its occupants were settling down for the night.

"Do we wait?" Sandy asked. "Now that we really have him pinned down—"

Ken nodded. "We can't afford not to. One of us, though, will have to go find a phone and call Richards' office. And I suppose if we find we're stuck here all night—who knows? Maybe Fenton sleeps like anybody else—we'll have to call the house eventually too, and let them know where we are."

"And let Bert know where his car is." Sandy grinned. "I hope he doesn't think the night air hurts

it. Do you think we should call Richards' office now?"

OUTSMARTED

63

"Let's wait a little while," Ken suggested. "If Fenton's coming right out again, we want to be ready to take off. If it begins to look as if he's settled down for the night, we can try to get word to Richards. Maybe he could get back here by morning himself then."

There was silence for a while, broken only by the occasional hum of a car on the highway beyond the tourist court. Sandy moved the rear-view mirror so that through it they could both keep an eye on Fenton's doorway and the dimly visible blue sedan.

"If you were Fenton," Ken said finally, "and you had just relieved someone of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, what would you do?"

Sandy glanced sideways at him. "Is that a rhetorical question? Or do you really want an answer?"

"Seriously," Ken said, "what would you do?"

"Put as much distance as I could between myself and the scene of the crime, I suppose."

"So would I," Ken agreed. "Which is probably why we'd make unsuccessful criminals. We think of the obvious. Fenton was smarter. He planned to hide out in Kenshoa Park—no great distance away, but a pretty unlikely spot for a criminal to choose. The police wouldn't be likely to think of it offhand."

"But Fenton was caught," Sandy reminded him.

"I know. The old unforeseeable accident." Ken whistled softly through his teeth. "What I'm wondering is whether he took the most direct route there, or whether he wandered around on little back roads."

"Would it make any difference?" Sandy asked. "He probably expected to have considerable start on anybody who was looking for him." He reached over to

64 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

open the glove compartment and began to grope around inside.

Ken grinned. "This is Bert's car—remember? He probably doesn't keep a stock of emergency rations like—"

"I wasn't," Sandy told him loftily, "looking for a chocolate bar." He closed the compartment and held out the folded paper in his hand. "I was looking for a map."

"Pardon me—though I think you'll agree my mistake was natural."

"Do you or don't you want to look at the routes between Beltville and Kenshoa Park?"

"Oh, I do, I do!" Ken assured him earnestly.

Sandy flipped on the small map light set into the instrument panel, as Ken twisted around for an unobstructed view out the back window.

When he didn't immediately turn back again, Sandy said quickly, "Anything happening?"

"No. I caught sight of some kind of movement through the mirror, but it's at cabin Number Seven." There was amusement in Ken's voice as he added, "Take a look at the hunter."

Sandy turned around for a fuller view. "'Yoicks' is the word."

The big broad-shouldered man who was leaving the room next to Fenton's almost filled the doorway. His violently colored plaid shirt was brilliant in the light streaming past him, but it was the small scarlet hunting cap above his heavily bearded face that made his appearance so ludicrous.

The man's booming voice carried to them clearly, as

OUTSMARTED

65

he called back into his room. "That all we need, Joe? Cigarettes and pipe tobacco?" And he added, after an inaudible answer, "O.K. Be back in about fifteen minutes."

By the time the hunter had gone past, in his ancient station wagon, the boys were both poring over the map.

"Here." Sandy felt in his pocket until he found a pencil, and pointed it at the circle marked Beltville. Then he indicated Kenshoa Park. "There are more ways of getting from one to the other than there are to skin the well-known cat," he said. With his pencil he traced first the main

highway route, and afterward the three smaller roads that connected the two points.

"The highway's probably the shortest," Ken said.

"Probably—about forty miles. But the others can't be much longer." Sandy's pencil poised questioningly. "Wonder why it took him two hours to get there."

"I was wondering too. Of course he had to get out of sight somewhere, to transfer the money to that bag, and then get rid of the paymaster's briefcase. And then he had to get to his car . . ."

"Even so . . ." They both looked into the mirror, to assure themselves that Fenton's light was still on and his door still shut. "Even so," Sandy repeated, "he had plenty of time on the way to—to—" He hesitated.

"What's on your mind?" Ken asked. "Are you thinking he might have hidden the money somewhere on the way, instead of in the park, as everybody seemed to think?"

"Well, he might have, mightn't he?" Sandy's voice quickened. "And if that's what he did, I'll bet he didn't take the main road. There'd be lots more likely hiding

66 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

places along the less-traveled ones—like this one, for example, that only goes through one village. The rest of the way it must pass nothing but farm land and woods."

Ken considered the suggestion at length. "It could be," he agreed finally. "And if that is what he did, there certainly won't be any way for Richards—or anybody else—to find the money unless Fenton leads him right to it. Forty miles of open country—" He shook his head. "Though I suppose," he added, "that's not much more hopeless than twenty-five thousand acres of park land. Either way, I'd say it's lucky somebody has Fenton in sight."

"Especially somebody gifted, intelligent, alert—in short, Holt and Allen."

"Right." Ken grinned briefly. "Guess one of us had better go call Richards' office." He glanced

down at his watch. "Joe will be getting irritated, if he's waiting for that pipe tobacco," he murmured. "Daniel Boone's been gone more than his promised fifteen minutes already. Well—" His hand reached for the door, and then he drew it back. "We'll give Fenton fifteen more minutes, just to be sure. Isn't it about time for a news broadcast?"

He reached over to turn off the map light and flick on the radio, while Sandy folded the map and put it away. They kept the volume low, in order not to attract attention to themselves, and the commentator's voice was scarcely more than a buzz. Up ahead the blue sedan stood, blacked-out, and the traffic had slowed on the highway. Jenckes' office was also dark and quiet. Once, halfway through the program, Sandy gave himself a shake.

OUTSMARTED

67

"Getting sleepy," he said apologetically. "This is lazy work—just sitting. Poke me if I really fall asleep."

"It will be a pleasure," Ken assured him.

". . . and that's the news roundup of the world," the commentator concluded finally. "The time is now nine forty-five, courtesy of—"

Ken turned the switch and the voice died.

"You going to make that call now?" Sandy asked, sitting up.

"Might as well. A considerable amount of tempus has fugit-ed since we saw Fenton shut himself in. I guess if he were going anywhere else, he'd have gone by now." Once more Ken reached for the door.

"I'll leave a little trail of millet seed—or gold flakes, maybe—if I have to take off after him while you're gone," Sandy told him. "Of course," he added casually, "if you're going down the road to that diner to make the call, and they happen to have any sandwiches made up—"

"Wait a minute," Ken said quietly.

"Huh? I didn't say I was terribly hungry yet," Sandy protested. "I was planning ahead to—"

Ken motioned him to silence. "I was just thinking Joe must be pretty much annoyed by now," he said in a thoughtful voice. "The well-dressed hunter never did get back, did he?"

"I guess not, or we'd have seen him. We were looking through the mirror the whole time." Sandy

sounded puzzled.

"Have you ever been inside the court?" Ken jerked his head toward the row of rooms, some half of them— including Fenton's and his neighbor's—still lighted.

68 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"No. Bert went through the place, I think, to do a story when Jenckes opened up. Why?"

"I don't know. It just suddenly seems queer to me that it would take a man"—Ken looked at his watch— "almost forty-five minutes to bring back cigarettes and some pipe tobacco."

"He probably stopped for a cup of coffee—and a piece of pie, maybe."

Ken ignored him. "And it seems especially queer when the man has the room next to Fenton's."

"Somebody has to have that room," Sandy pointed out. "And just because it happens to be a hunter who happens to have an appetite—"

Ken was still following the thread of his own thoughts. "He was driving an old car too—one about as old as Fenton's."

"Lots of hunters do, even when they've got better cars. Wood roads aren't— Listen, what's eating you?" Suddenly Sandy laughed. "I get it. You're cooking up some fancy scheme in which Fenton has disguised himself in a hunting jacket, and departed in his second car while we sit here fondly keeping an eye on his Hudson and his lighted window."

And when Ken didn't immediately deny the charge, Sandy went on: "Use your head. How could he have done it? We've been watching the doors; we can see them both from here. And there aren't any doors on the highway side of the building—that much I do know about the place. So how could he have got from one room to the other?"

"There are windows, aren't there—on the far side?"

"Oh!"

OUTSMARTED

69

"Come on," Ken said. "At least it's worth a look."

A moment later they were both walking swiftly away from the car. They put another two hundred feet between themselves and the blue sedan before they crossed the street to the side where the tourist court stood, and entered an empty lot beyond it that stretched clear through the block to the highway.

The ground there was overgrown with weeds and cluttered with empty tin cans and old bottles that made walking precarious in the dark. It took them long minutes to cover the short distance to the edge of the highway.

There they turned and walked back along the road to the brick building.

At the near end of it Ken stopped and counted windows. "There's Number Six—right there." He pointed.

Then, followed closely by Sandy, and keeping wide of the building in order to avoid the glow of light streaming from its windows, they edged their way along until they were directly opposite the window Ken had pointed out. They moved toward it quietly, keeping outside the band of light it cast on the weedy ground.

When they reached the wall, Ken stretched out his hand and touched the screen. It swung loosely from its hinges. It had been unlatched from the inside.

Sandy pointed to the next window, behind which Joe was presumably still waiting for his cigarettes. Ken nodded, and Sandy made a cautious approach to it. Within a few moments he was back.

He nodded his head. The other screen was loose too.

The boys looked at each other in the half-light.

Then, slowly, Ken leaned sidewise along the wall un-

70 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

til he could see into Fenton's room. When he stepped boldly forward, to stand directly beneath the window, Sandy joined him.

The bed had not been touched. There was no sign of occupancy of any kind. And the room was

empty.

A moment later they were looking through the window of cabin Number Seven. It, too, was as bare and untouched as Number Six.

"Walked right out from under our noses!" Sandy said, in a voice of subdued rage. "Changed his clothes, pasted on a false three-day beard, stuffed a pillow or something inside his jacket, and we let him go! We're so dumb we'd probably have given his car a push, if he'd asked us to."

"Take it easy," Ken said. "Let's get out of here. He's only got an hour's start." He moved back toward the end of the building.

"An hour!" Sandy repeated, trailing him with angry strides. "With us after him, he wouldn't need more than thirty seconds to—" He collided with Ken, who had stopped short at the corner of the building.

Immediately Ken turned and clamped a hand across Sandy's mouth.

From the empty lot that stretched ahead of them came the rattle of a tin can, followed by a muffled grunt.

"The blue-sedan boys are getting curious too," Ken breathed.

CHAPTER VII

THE LIMPING FOOTSTEPS

A huge truck and trailer roared by on the highway. When the sound of its passing had faded into silence, the boys heard again the faint rattle of a tin can against a shoe.

Ken's eyes searched out the looming bulk of a scrubby bush near the edge of the highway, and cautiously he drew Sandy toward its protecting shadow. When they crouched beneath its low branches the two bright rectangles in the rear wall of the tourist court—the windows of rooms Number Six and Seven—were some twenty feet away.

For a few minutes they could neither hear nor see the sign of any presence except their own. And then, slowly, a man's head rose above the level of Fenton's window, until its whole shape was silhouetted against the light. It turned to the right and to the left; someone was searching the room—and finding it empty—just as the boys had done a moment before. The screen was lifted slightly; once more it proved to be loose on its hinges.

71

72

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

A moment later the head disappeared, then reappeared against the light of room Number Seven, where the same gestures of search and discovery were repeated.

Suddenly the shadowy figure seemed to abandon its attempt at secrecy. Stones rattled as it dashed back to Fenton's window. The screen was jerked out, the window thrust up, and the boys had a momentary glimpse of a square bull-necked shape as the intruder pulled himself up over the sill and into the room.

Ken signaled Sandy with a touch on his arm, and the boys left their hiding place to move quickly toward the corner of the building. They cut diagonally across the empty lot, paused when they reached the sidewalk to assure themselves that the blue sedan still stood parked beyond the tourist court's sign, and then ran across the street to their own car.

Sandy started the motor. "Where to? The office?"

"It's the easiest place to phone from," Ken agreed. "If we can get word to Richards about Fenton's disguise, and the kind of car he's driving, Richards ought to be able to pick him up at the entrance to Kenshoa Park, if that's where Fenton's heading."

Sandy eased the car along the curb without lights until he had turned the first corner. Then he flicked the headlights on and stepped on the accelerator.

The engine coughed. Sandy frowned. The engine coughed again, twice.

Ken's glance traveled with Sandy's to the gasoline gauge. Its arrow pointed to Empty.

Sandy groaned and leaned on the wheel, as if urging the car forward. "If we can make the top of this hill,"

THE LIMPING FOOTSTEPS

73

he muttered, "we might be able to coast from there as far as the office. It's downgrade most of the way. If Bert—!"

Just below the crest of the hill the engine sputtered frantically, as if in its death throes, and then, with what seemed to be its final gasp, the car reached the top. It stood almost perfectly still for a moment on the stretch of level ground there, and Ken had his hand on the door to get out and give it a push when it began to roll slowly forward.

Gradually its speed increased. Sandy plotted their route to avoid stop streets and crossing lights, and was finally able to maneuver the coupe into the driveway of the Advance office with enough remaining momentum to get it back into the parking area.

He shut off the key and slumped back against the seat. "From here on," he said, "Bert can take it. And what I'd like to do to Bert is—" He stopped, his vocabulary inadequate to express his disgust. "As if we hadn't had enough trouble today," he added, anticlimactically, as they walked toward the Advance's rear door.

"You're sure we didn't put Bert in the same spot?" Ken asked, with a brief grin. "I don't remember buying gas today on the way to or from that dog show."

"Serve him right if we did." Sandy unlocked the door and they stepped inside, turning on the lights as they walked on through into the front office.

Ken went directly to the telephone, got the operator, and inquired if Richards had been trying to reach the Allen number. When he found that no call had come in, he asked for the New York Office of the Security Indemnity Company again.

74 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Cheer up," he said in an aside toward Sandy's glum face, as he waited for the connection to be made. "Remember we're not the only ones who got fooled. Put your mind to work on the problem of who the blue-sedan boys are—if tonight has finally convinced you that they can't be trusted friends of Fenton," he added.

"I'm convinced of that all right, but—" Sandy's gloom suddenly lifted. "I know what I'll do. I'll go downstairs and develop the films of those mud impressions. At least that's a job I know how to tackle. Come on down when you finish," he added from the door opening on the basement stairs.

Ken joined him in the darkroom five minutes later, to find Sandy gently rocking the film tank with one hand and feeding himself a chocolate bar with the other. He swallowed a mouthful hurriedly as he saw Ken's grin.

"There's one for you on the table," he said, "but of course you don't have to eat it."

"Thanks. As usual, I'm willing to sacrifice my digestion to save your feelings." Ken picked up the candy and began to strip its foil off. "I got the office all right," he continued, "and they're expecting a call from Richards pretty soon. About ten-thirty, they thought. They'll have him call us here immediately."

Sandy looked up at the electric timer on a shelf over his table just as its bell sounded, and pushed the rest of the chocolate bar into his mouth in order to free his hands. He poured the developer out of the tank, filled it with water, and, after another minute's waiting, emptied the water out and refilled the tank with hypo.

THE LIMPING FOOTSTEPS

75

"In another five minutes we'll know whether we've got anything or not," he said.

When the timer bell rang Sandy lifted the cover off the tank and removed the two sheets of film. He dropped them in a tray of water for a moment before holding them up to the light.

"Perfect!" His good humor, partially restored by food, returned in full strength at the sight of the clear detail on the negatives. "Look at that!" he said. "Sharp as a razor." He held it so that Ken could see the enlarged transparent image of what was unmistakably a coiled hooded cobra, its upper length lifting in sinuous curves to the swollen head.

Then Sandy reluctantly dropped the negative back into the water. "It'll have to wash for another

ten minutes," he said, drying his hands. "What do you think?" he went on, as they both walked toward the stairs. "Was it Fenton who was wearing that ring— or one of the blue-sedan boys—or somebody else entirely?"

"I've been trying," Ken said slowly, "to reconstruct my memory of Fenton as we first saw him there in the Halfway Diner. Afterward, in the car, it seems to me he sat with his hands shoved down in his pockets. But when he was eating at the counter—" He shook his head, his eyes narrowed.

"I remember!" Sandy said suddenly. "When I said his pie looked good—I can still see the way he lifted up a forkful of it. It was all drippy with juice—the pie, I mean—and there was a blob of the white ice cream on top of the purple blackberries, and—"

76 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Ken raised one eyebrow. "That's a very delightful scene you're describing," he said, "but—?"

"And there was a ring on his finger!" Sandy concluded. "A dark rectangle. I'm sure of it!"

"Good!" Ken grinned, but almost immediately the grin died. "Or not so good, I guess. We don't have to identify Fenton—we know who he is. Unless," he added wryly, "he pulls another disguise on us, of course. If the ring didn't belong to him, it might help us to identify the person who attacked him out there in the parking space. But as it is—" He broke off at the sight of Sandy's crestfallen face. "They're still swell negatives, maestro."

"Oh, sure," Sandy said. "Swell! Just not good for anything, that's all."

The phone bell rang as they reached the top steps, and Ken waited for Sandy to pick up the extension on Bert's desk before he himself lifted the instrument on Pop's.

"Hello," he said.

"Holt?" a voice asked. "Is that you? The office says you want to talk to me. This is Richards of Security Indemnity."

"We both want to talk to you," Ken said. "Sandy Allen's on the other wire. A good deal's been happening here, Mr. Richards. First of all, late this afternoon . . ."

Ken began to report the events of the past several hours as accurately and concisely as he could, with an occasional interruption when Sandy remembered an omitted detail.

At the point in his story where Sandy had so eagerly

THE LIMPING FOOTSTEPS

77

photographed the impression of the seal ring, Ken hesitated. He didn't want to expose Sandy to Richards' amusement.

"Does Fenton wear a ring—big rectangular seal thing?" Ken asked.

"That's right." Richards recited briskly. "Mole on left shoulder. No other identifying physical marks. Wears large onyx seal ring with snake design. Size ten shoe. Size— But you don't want all this, do you?"

Ken looked over at Sandy, who grinned and shrugged; there was no longer any point in mentioning the photographs. "No," Ken said. "We don't need that."

"So when we got ourselves cleaned up at the house," Sandy picked it up, "we . . ."

Between them they finished the story, and Richards heard them through. His only comment as they talked was an occasional groan that sounded like "And I had to tear after a bus to Kenshoa Park."

"And that's all, I guess," Ken concluded. "We left the tourist court and came back here to try to reach you."

Richards waited a moment. "O.K." he said then. "I've got another man up here now, and we'll both take an entrance to the park. Maybe we can still catch him on his way in. Red and green plaid—did you say that hunting jacket was?"

"That's right. Unless he's changed again, of course. If we hadn't been so slow on the uptake—"

"Don't—I can't take it!" Richards said. "How do you think I feel? Hold on a minute." They could hear his muffled voice continuing to someone who apparently stood near him. His concluding words came

78 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

clearly. "So you get on over to the south entrance. I'll take the other one as soon as I'm finished here." His voice was again directed into the mouthpiece. "Anything else, you two?"

"What about the possibility that Fenton hid the money before he reached the park?" Sandy asked. "We've been looking at a map and—" He described the lesser routes they had marked between Beltville and Kenshoa Park.

Richards heard him out. "It's a possibility," he agreed finally, "but I'd say that's about all it is. Fenton's too smart to cache loot on private property—in a field that might be plowed any day, or a wood lot that might be cut and cleared, or in some abandoned building that might be torn down before he could get back to it. I think he was figuring far enough ahead so that if he did get caught the stuff would be safe for the period of his term. And a heavily wooded state park's a good bet for that; most sections of it are left pretty much in their natural state. So personally I'm banking on the park."

There was silence for a moment. Sandy looked dejected again.

Then Ken and Richards both began to speak at once.

"About the—"

"About those two men in the blue sedan—"

"That's just what I was going to ask about," Ken said. "We're beginning to get pretty curious about them. Are they detectives, do you think?"

"I do not." Richards waited a moment. "Look," he said finally, "does one of them limp?"

Ken and Sandy exchanged glances.

THE LIMPING FOOTSTEPS 79

"Not that we know of," Ken said. "The only one we caught a glimpse of—the one who climbed into Fenton's room at the tourist court—looked like a big bruiser. But we only saw the upper part of his body, and that's all we could tell. I don't think the man who was struggling with Fenton in the office parking lot limped, but we can't even be sure of that. It was dark out there." When Richards spoke next his voice had an undercurrent of deadly seriousness. "I don't like this," he said. "There are a couple of characters who might be interested in this Fenton deal—and your blue-sedan boys might be them. Did you ever hear of the Rand brothers? Limpy and Ted?"

"No," Ken said, and Sandy echoed him. "Who are they?"

"Bad medicine. They've done time on several occasions for racketeering, armed robbery, and various things. And we happen to know that while Fenton was still in the penitentiary, a friend of the Rands'—fellow named Dalzell who was a cellmate of Fenton's for a while—tried to arrange a deal. The Rands offered to get Fenton out, by some kind of mythical political pull, if Fenton would split the Plunket pay roll with Dalzell and themselves. Fenton turned them down cold, but I've always wondered if they didn't plan to keep after him. If they can take that money away from Fenton, after he gets it himself, he couldn't even bring a charge against them. And that would certainly sound like an attractive proposition to Ted and Limpy."

Richards was silent for a moment, as if in deep

80

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBKA

thought, and then he asked abruptly, "Have they seen you—these two men in the blue sedan?"

Ken and Sandy once more exchanged glances across the room.

"I don't think so," Ken answered dubiously. "They saw our car, of course, this afternoon when they were following it. But I don't think the man out in the parking lot got a look at us, and we kept out of sight tonight."

"Why?" Sandy asked.

"I hope they haven't—and I hope they won't," Richards said firmly. "If they've seen you around Fenton, and should happen to get the idea that you're involved with him somehow—well, it might not be very healthy. So steer clear of them, will you?"

"We'll be glad to," Ken assured him. "But don't worry about us. I don't see how they could possibly tie us up with Fenton, anyway. It must have been obvious we were just giving a stranger a ride this afternoon."

"Well, keep away from them—just in case," Richards urged. "I'll get along to the park entrance, now, and I'll let you know if anything breaks. You certainly deserve any story that comes out of this thing."

"Is there any way we can call you direct, to check?" Ken asked.

"No. I'm holed up in the cabin next to the one Fenton had here. I have to come down to the lodge to make my calls. But if you don't hear from me, you can always phone the office, the way you did tonight. Thanks, you two."

Five minutes after Richards said good-bye the boys

THE LIMPING FOOTSTEPS 81

were ready to leave the office. Sandy had hung his films up to dry, Ken had made a few notes on the Fenton story to date, and they had tried unsuccessfully to reach Bert to ask him to drive down to the office to pick them up.

"It already feels as if this day had lasted about ten years," Sandy muttered, as they started out.

"And now on top of everything, we have to walk home."

Once they had covered the few blocks that took them out of the Brentwood business district, the street seemed dark and quiet. A late moon had just risen, and the sidewalk beneath their feet was a pattern of black and silver. Only an occasional lighted window showed. Most of Brentwood was asleep.

"I never noticed before," Sandy said, his voice instinctively lowered, "how much noise I make when I walk. You do too. Stop and listen—we're practically the only noisy things in town."

Ken obligingly halted, as Sandy did.

For a moment the silence did seem complete. But just as Sandy opened his mouth to speak, the silence was broken by the unmistakable sound of another pair of feet somewhere behind them.

Ken grinned. "You can see," he said, "that we're not quite the only—"

He stopped, and his eyes met Sandy's. There had been something unusual about the sound they had heard—an uneven quality to its rhythm.

Ken grinned again, to banish the thought that had just come into his mind—and which he was sure Sandy shared.

"Just because we heard about a limping man to-

82 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

night," he began, but abandoned the rest of the sentence to listen once more.

It was plainer this time—one firm step, and then a faint shuffle before the next one, as if a foot dragged along the sidewalk.

The boys both looked back over the block they had just traveled, but the tree shadows were thick and no figure was visible.

Then they looked at each other, without comment, and started forward again. Their own steps were quick, and they walked more lightly than usual, but they forced down the temptation to run.

At the end of the next block, just before they turned right for the last lap of their journey, they both tried again to look back. For an instant they caught a glimpse of a large figure, moving with a kind of awkward lurch. He was closer than they had expected him to be. Ken felt certain he had gained on them despite their own hurry. And then the figure was buried in shadow again.

"After we're around the corner we can run," Ken muttered.

But an instant later, when they had turned to the right, they stopped dead in their tracks.

Between them and the Allen house, which was still a long half-block away, stood a car. It was parked at the curb, under the heavy black shadow of a maple. Its taillights were not lit, but the faint gleam of a street light opposite caught the thin thread of vapor drifting from the exhaust pipe; the car's motor was idling.

And even in the shadow it was possible to see that the vehicle was painted a light blue.

CHAPTER VIII
THE WARNING

Ken and Sandy stood stock-still, but their minds were working furiously. To run for home now would carry them right past the parked car occupied—they both felt certain—by Ted Rand. And behind them, approaching steadily nearer, were the soft uneven footsteps of—this too seemed beyond doubt—Ted's notorious brother, Limpy. "Bad medicine," Richards had called them both. It seemed only too likely that the brothers were armed. And it was an incontrovertible fact that even Sandy's long legs could not outdistance a bullet.

Ken thrust out of his mind the clamoring questions of why the Rands had fastened their attention on Sandy and himself, of what connection the Rands could imagine they had with Fenton, and tried instead to think how to reach the safety of the Allen house.

But it was Sandy who moved first. He knew every inch of this street; he had played in every driveway and backyard of it from the time he could first walk. Now

83

84 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

his huge hand fastened on Ken's arm and pulled him ahead at a slight angle that took them off the sidewalk. A split second later they were in the shadow of Mr. Calkins' pet oak tree, and a moment after that they were hugging the hedge that bordered the Calkins driveway.

The hedge ran parallel to the side street from which they had just turned off, and stood about twenty feet from the sidewalk along which Limpy was steadily advancing. When the boys held their heads close to the thick privet barrier they could distinctly hear the uneven footsteps.

And then suddenly those footsteps ceased, and the glimmer of a flashlight came faintly through the branches. When the footsteps began again they were slower; Limpy was on guard.

Sandy's foot touched something that gave off a tiny metallic sound, and he froze still. But in the next instant his body tensed for action.

He grabbed Ken's hand and placed it on something cold and hard—the object which Sandy's foot had just brushed. Ken recognized it immediately, and in the same moment understood Sandy's intention. One of the Calkins' huge ash cans, standing now beside them upside down and empty—Mr. Calkins didn't like to let his ash cans get wet—could create a magnificent diversion in the quiet street. Hurling by Sandy's strong arms, to land clattering and banging against the hard surface of the sidewalk, it would rouse every sleeper in the block and send the Rands flying.

Sandy lifted the can off the ground and they moved stealthily back along the hedge to wait near its end.

THE WARNING

85

When Limpy turned the corner, Sandy lifted it high. Ken held his breath. In one more second—And then suddenly a brilliant flash of light encircled them. It struck Sandy's feet first, and flew upward immediately to shine full in the redhead's eyes.

Sandy's arms had already begun to swing the big can forward. Now, with a violent switch of direction, he brought it down instead of out.

Limpy's mouth opened for a shout, his big body moved heavily sideways in the first motion of retreat. But it was too late.

The can came down over his head like some enormous hat, covered it completely, and jammed against his wide shoulders. The flashlight flew off at an angle. And Limpy's bellow of rage reverberated hollowly against the corrugated metal cage.

Sandy grabbed the two handles of the can and threw all his weight on them. With a mighty effort he heaved the cylinder down over the obstruction of Limpy's shoulders, until it covered the upper part of the man's arms and effectively pinned them to his sides. Limpy's hands clasped and unclasped in futile gestures, grasping at Sandy and missing him by inches. His bellows, echoing back on themselves, filled the quiet night with horrible sound.

Overhead, a window screeched open and Mr. Calkins' worried voice shouted down, "Who's

there? If somebody's tamperin' with my ash cans, I'll call the police!"

Lights sprang on all up and down the block. Down the street toward the Allen house a car door slammed and pounding footsteps approached.

86 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Ken and Sandy waited. A running figure drew near. He was a smaller man than Limpy, but his features, contorted now by fear and fury, had the same blunt hardness. When he was a scant fifteen feet away, Ken and Sandy stepped toward the ash can in which Limpy was encased, and thrust against it with all the strength in their arms.

Helpless and top-heavy, Limpy tried to withstand the push. But the temporary blindness and the rigidity of his arms seemed to have deprived him of his sense of balance. He leaned stiffly, like an axed tree. And then he went over forward, falling against the oncoming figure. The Rand brothers landed on the sidewalk together, with a jolt that shook the ground.

Ken and Sandy started to run. They detoured around the sprawling figures and made for the Allen house. But a particularly loud banging caused them to turn their heads. Mr. Calkins' ash can, with its unwilling occupant, was rolling down the concrete incline that lifted the Calkins driveway up from the level of the street.

The boys exchanged a single glance and then ran again.

The whole block was alive with lights and shouts now. Ken and Sandy finally huddled gratefully, out of sight, in the shadow of the evergreens at the corner of the Allen lawn.

A noisy clatter from the direction of the corner told them that Limpy, probably with his brother's help, had finally extricated himself from his confinement. Immediately afterward running steps drew near, and within a matter of seconds the Rands had hurled them-

THE WARNING

87

selves into their car. Its engine roared and its tires squealed on asphalt. The vehicle rocketed forward and out of sight around the next corner.

"What's going on out there?"

"Is it an accident? What's happened?"

From a dozen houses the questions were shouted, and several householders came out on their porches in hastily donned bathrobes. Beams from their flashlights crisscrossed in the street.

Mr. Calkins marched into the center of the pointed fingers of light and bent over his ash can.

"Hoodlums!" he said loudly. "That's what it was— hoodlums!"

"Looks like it, Mr. Calkins," a voice halfway down the block agreed.

"Yes, sir, hoodlums! Have we no police protection in this town? I'm going to write a letter to the Advance. That's what I'm going to do!" And with great dignity Mr. Calkins lifted up his ash can and carried it back up his driveway.

"He's going to write a letter to the Advance," Sandy said weakly.

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"That's what the man said." Ken looked at Sandy and Sandy looked at Ken.

Doors were closing now on the Allen block, and lights were being turned out again.

Ken grinned and then laughed. Sandy laughed too. It was a mistake. They both felt limp and exhausted after the tension of the past few minutes, and the laughter was a release. But once they had started, they couldn't stop.

"I think I'll write a letter to the Advance myself,"

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Ken said. "I'll—" But he was laughing too hard to go on.

He tried to muffle the sound of it, but it was no use. "I keep seeing him," he gasped. "And hearing him yell inside that thing."

"Dear Editor," Sandy said. "What do you think of the new fashion of ash cans for evening wear? I recently tried—" And he too gave up, overwhelmed by hilarity that was half hysteria.

It was five minutes later when they were able to stagger around to the back of the house and let themselves in through the kitchen door.

But, once inside, the warmth and cheerfulness of the room brought them back to sanity. Ken's laughter died and he returned to the door and turned the key in it.

Sandy sank into a chair. "It's not so funny after all," he said slowly. "What do you suppose they were after?"

"I think that's obvious," Ken said. "They were after us. But why?"

"After us? You mean they were going to—to kidnap us? But why?"

"That's my question," Ken pointed out with a brief grin that no longer indicated amusement. He sat down across from Sandy and leaned his elbows on the table. "What good would we be to the Rands? Or how are we a danger to them? What do we know that's worth a hoot?"

"Nothing," Sandy said.

"All right. Then what do they think we know?"

Sandy got up to walk restlessly back and forth in front of the stove. "Do you suppose they think we got that envelope that Fenton grabbed?"

THE WARNING 89

"That happened hours ago. Why would they wait until now to do something about it?"

"Maybe as long as they were on Fenton's tail—" Sandy gave it up and went on with his pacing.

After a moment he moved toward the windows and pulled the shades to the bottom. "I've got a feeling they're out there watching every move we make," he said half-apologetically. And then he added, "If we'd been able to come home in the car, this wouldn't have happened." He slumped wearily back into his chair.

"If the Rands wanted us," Ken told him, "they'd have found some means to get at us, whether we were walking or riding."

Sandy glanced at him sideways. "Sure. You're right. I'm just—" He broke off. "If they wanted us that badly," he went on slowly, after a minute, "do you suppose they still want us?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. Too bad we can't write a letter to the Advance," Ken added wryly, "explaining to whomsoever it may concern that we know nothing from nothing."

"Or we could print a big sign and put it out in front of the house."

But their efforts to treat the matter lightly wouldn't quite come off. They both gave it up and sat in silence for a while.

"I wish we'd never seen Fenton," Sandy said finally. "The messes we get into—!" He got to his feet. "Let's go to bed. Maybe when we wake up tomorrow we'll find we dreamed the whole crazy business."

Ken got up too. "Might as well," he agreed. "We're certainly not getting anywhere sitting here."

90 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

As he reached toward the kitchen light to turn it off, the phone rang.

The instrument in the hall was nearest. Ken took the few steps necessary to bring him to it.

"Hello," he said.

The voice that answered him was hoarse and raspy. "Which one of you is that—Allen or Holt?" it demanded.

Swiftly Ken clamped a hand over the mouthpiece. "Get on the extension," he told Sandy, and waited another moment as Sandy bounded toward Pop's study.

Then Ken took his hand away and asked evenly, "Who is this? Who's speaking?"

"You know who it is I!" There was a short bark of angry laughter. "All right," the voice went on, "I don't care which of you I'm talking to. You both think you're pretty cute, don't you? The next time we see you we'll show you some tricks with ash cans you never heard of!"

"If you won't say who you are—" Ken began firmly.

"Hey! Don't hang up if you know what's good for you. We wanted to talk to you—we still want to. Where's Fenton?"

"I haven't any idea. Who is Fenton?" Ken added, for good measure.

"Don't try to pull that kind of stuff on me." The voice was venomous. "You know where he is. You helped him duck out."

Ken concealed his surprise. "Look, mister. We didn't help Fenton do anything. So why don't you leave us alone and—"

"This is your last chance, chump," the voice cut in. "Tell us where Fenton is and we will leave you alone.

THE WARNING

91

Or maybe"—the angry bark of laughter sounded again —"you'd rather we used a little persuasion on you first."

"I told you we don't know where he is. So—"

"And we know you do. We know all about it. We read the note he left for you when he took off."

Ken could hear Sandy's faint gasp of astonishment over the wire, and he made no effort to keep his own voice from sounding amazed as he asked, "Note? What note?"

"The one on his bureau—attached to Ken Holt's press card. The note that says"—the voice raised to a jeering falsetto—" 'Dear Ken—thanks for the help.' " There was a pause. "So now, you squirt, maybe you'll realize we're not kidding. Where is he?"

Sandy exploded over the wire from Pop's study.

"Listen, you cheap crook!" he roared. "We don't know where Fenton is and we don't care! And we wouldn't even tell you what time it was—or whether it was raining or not. If you know what's good for you, you'll clear out of town, or the police might want to try a little persuasion on you! If we ever lay eyes on you again we'll weld ash cans on both your fat heads!"

Ken winced as Sandy slammed down the phone. Then he let his own phone drop into its cradle. Sandy came bounding out of the study and skidded to a halt on the polished hall floor.

"Sorry I blew my top," he began, "but that guy got me good and mad! Who does he think he is?" Then his voice slowed down. "There really isn't any point in our calling the police, is there? It sounded good when I was yelling, but—"

92 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBKA

"Yes, but—" Ken agreed. "If the police weren't a little inclined to think we're imaginative anyway, it might be a good idea. But what would we tell them? Nobody touched us. All they did, really, was to put up a little feeble resistance when you assaulted them with an ash can."

Sandy struck his right fist hard into his left palm. "That's nothing to what I'd like to do to Fenton, if I ever saw him again. Imagine him deliberately throwing us to the wolves with that note! And where'd he get your press card?"

Ken grinned faintly. "I take it you no longer expect to wake up in the morning and find we dreamed this whole business."

"This is no dream! This," Sandy said, "is a nightmare!"

CHAPTER IX

THE MICROFILE ROOM

the alarm, set for seven-thirty, jangled for only a second before Ken's hand came down on the button. He leaped out of bed, padded across the room, and pulled the covers from Sandy's bed. The redhead opened one eye. "Go away."

Ken sympathized with him. They had sat up late the night before talking. But he jerked again at the covers that Sandy had automatically pulled back over himself.

"Come on," Ken said firmly. "Get up. There's a big story cooking—remember? We ought to be able to sell it to Global News when it breaks, too—if we get the first crack at it. Come on." And when the redhead reached once more for the covers, Ken added, "Global might buy pictures, too—if you get any."

Sandy sat up then and yawned. "The thing is," he muttered, "Pop may change his mind about this assignment. When he hears what happened—what nearly happened—to us last night, he's likely to un-assign us fast."

93

94 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Ken had begun to climb into his clothes. Sandy's eyes finally opened wide, and then he blinked. "Hey," he said, "what's the idea of the corduroys and the sport shirt? Is this by any chance," he asked suspiciously, "your idea of what the well-dressed hunter should wear? Are you toying with the idea of trailing Fenton with typewriter and camera?"

"Don't try to talk until you're really wide awake," Ken advised him. "Maybe by then you'll remember some of the things we discussed last night; that we decided to head straight for Kenshoa Park if Richards says Fenton turned up there, for example." He started for the door. "Don't go back to sleep. I'm putting the coffee on right now."

Ten minutes later when Sandy entered the kitchen Ken showed him the note Bert had left for them on the table—a note scrawled at the bottom of the same sheet of paper they had left for Bert the night before, with the news that his coupe was at the office and out of gas.

Bert had written:

When I lend my car I fully expect to have it returned from whence it was borrowed.

P.S. With the tank fitted, of course.

P.P.S. Better fill your own tank before you take off. I barely made it home.

P.P.P.S. Pop and I are off to cover the opening of the State Legislature. Don't wake Mom—Pop had such a good time last night that she couldn't get him to come home until two. And Pop says to get that Fenton story or else.

THE MICROFILE ROOM 95

P.P.P.P.S. Or else you'll cover dog shows for the rest of your lives.

"See?" Ken said, when Sandy dropped the note back on the table. "You were worried about Pop pulling us off the story. I told you those things take care of themselves."

"I wasn't worried exactly," Sandy said, beginning to lay strips of bacon in the frying pan. He glanced over at Ken, idling by the window. "Since this seems to be your morning for making everything sound easy, I suppose the oranges are going to squeeze themselves, and the toast is going to get itself toasted?"

Ken roused himself. "With a little help from me." He grinned and reached for a knife.

"While you're at it," Sandy continued, "see if you can't figure out a way for the Rands to take care of themselves—instead of taking care of us, which seemed to be their idea last night."

Ken looked at him innocently. "But last night you sounded eager to take care of them. You—"

"I was too mad last night," Sandy said over his shoulder, "to be my usual intelligent self. This morning I feel that the better part of valor is to sit down with the telephone, behind a nice thick barbed-wire barricade, and wait for Richards to let us know when he's trailed Fenton to the money."

Ken handed Sandy a glass of orange juice and swallowed half of his own before he spoke. "And suppose that never happens? Suppose Fenton keeps up his record for elusiveness?"

"All the more reason for the barbed wire," Sandy told him, removing the last of the bacon from the pan

96 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

and replacing it with four yellow-yolked eggs. "As long as Fenton is loose, the Rands may go on thinking we know where he is. Which was why Fenton left that fake message." He swallowed his orange juice in four huge gulps. "And as long as they go on thinking that—"

Ken took the empty orange glass away from him and went to the sink to rinse it with his own.

"You certainly must have had a bad night," he said. "Look. The Rands aren't going to try to pull anything in broad daylight, in a town where they must realize by now we're fairly well known."

"You didn't put that plaid shirt on with the idea of staying in our home town all day," Sandy pointed out, serving the bacon and eggs.

Ken grinned as he sat down. "I noticed you put yours on too." And when Sandy reached in dignified silence for a piece of toast, Ken added, "Cheer up. All we have to do is keep an eye out for a blue sedan. After all, we're not color blind."

"And they're not dumb. If they haven't got rid of that blue car by now, I'll eat my hat."

Ken shrugged. "Just eat your breakfast—and relax. Maybe by the time we get a call through to Richards this morning, we'll learn the whole thing's over."

They ate in silence for a few minutes and then Ken said casually, "Of course it wouldn't really matter what they were driving. With your sixth sense for being followed, you even suspect a three-year-old's kiddie car if you happen to see it twice in one day."

Sandy didn't reply. But a few minutes later, as they were clearing their empty plates off the table, he said,

THE MICROFILE ROOM

97

"Remind me to get some film on the way to the office. I'm nearly out."

It was a quarter to nine when they stood on the back porch, inhaling the crisp autumn air. The sunlight was dazzling. Late flowers bloomed everywhere, and a family wash flapped friendly arms and legs at them from two yards away. It didn't seem possible that this quiet residential street had been visited by the sinister Rand brothers the night before.

Sandy took the driver's seat and backed the red convertible out of the driveway. They saw three parked cars as they drove to the corner, but all of them were familiar and beyond suspicion.

At the office parking lot they found Bert's coupe gone. Only Pop's sedan shared the parking space with the three cars belonging to the Advance printing crew.

Hank, the printer, was barking into Pop's phone when the boys entered the office. He looked up when he heard them come in. "Hold it," he said into the mouthpiece. "Here they are now."

"Thanks, Hank." Ken took the instrument from him, and Sandy picked up an extension.

"Holt? Richards here."

"Did Fenton turn up?" Ken asked excitedly.

"Not a sign of him." Richards sounded weary and baffled. "I can't swear he isn't in the park, but I know he didn't come in by either of the regular entrances."

"You mean he might have abandoned the car and walked in?" Sandy asked.

"I don't know what I mean any more. All I know is he didn't drive in here." Richards sighed.

"But I realize

98 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

he might have walked in, so I'm checking every garage in the vicinity to see if he did leave his car somewhere in the neighborhood. You're sure he didn't come back to the tourist court last night?"

Ken and Sandy exchanged a startled glance. "No," Ken said. "We didn't check. We never thought of it."

"I'll do that right now over the phone," Sandy said quickly. "Don't hang up. It'll only take a minute." He put the receiver down and grabbed instead the instrument on Bert's desk.

"What about those two men you mentioned to me yesterday?" Richards asked, before Ken could speak. "Did you run into them again?"

"We sure did," Ken told him. "I was just going to tell you. I guess they're the Rand brothers, all right. We were—" Quickly he reported to Richards the incident of the ash can, and the subsequent telephone call.

Richards groaned when he had finished. "I was afraid of that," he said. "You're sure you're all right—both of you?" And when Ken told him they were, Richards went on in a worried voice, "I wish there were some charge we could have them picked up on. Could you press charges against them for last night?" he asked hopefully.

"They didn't really touch us," Ken pointed out. "And, anyway, it was so dark I doubt if we could make an identification that would stick."

Sandy cut abruptly back into the conversation. "No sign of Fenton at the tourist court," he reported. "Cabins six and seven both empty, but the old Hudson is still parked there."

Richards sighed. "O.K. Thanks. Guess all I can do

THE MICROFILE ROOM

99

now is keep an eye out up here, and go on checking the countryside for some sign of the station wagon. Keep me informed if anything turns up down there, will you? And for heavens' sake stay away from the Rands. They'll be really sore at you after that trick you pulled last night. And when the Rands are sore I wouldn't want to tangle with them."

"You'd better watch out for them then," Ken said. "They may turn up at the park themselves, if we convinced them there's no use hanging around us any longer."

"// we convinced them," Sandy echoed doubtfully, when they had both hung up a moment later. "You know," he went on slowly, "I think Richards—or we, or somebody—ought to reconsider the possibility that Fenton did hide the money before he reached the park that day."

"Or," Ken suggested, "that he's already picked it up somehow, and is now far on his way to Mexico or somewhere."

They looked at each other.

"Of course," Ken said finally, "if you're really determined to drop the whole thing right now, there's no use my making this suggestion, but . . ." He let his voice trail off.

"What suggestion?" Sandy demanded. Ken grinned faintly and Sandy added, "I said it would be nice to sit beside the phone and get the story that way. But if we can't get it that way—Were you kidding, or do you really have an idea?"

"I don't know if it's an idea or not," Ken admitted. "But we still don't know what Fenton was doing at the

100

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

library last night. And he doesn't sound like the type who would drop in there for a little light reading in the middle of a crisis like this."

Sandy was already halfway to the door. "Come on," he said. "What are you waiting for?"

They reached the library just as it opened its doors to the public, and while the staff was still busy readying its shelves and files for the day.

Miss Wakefield, the head librarian, frowned when she saw them approach her desk. "Surely it's a day early for the library column, isn't it, Sandy?" she asked. "I haven't even started to prepare it yet, and—"

"Yes, ma'am. That's not due until tomorrow," Sandy assured her. "We just dropped in for a little information about someone who came in here last night shortly before the library closed."

"We think maybe he used the microfile room," Ken added.

"I wasn't on duty after six o'clock last night," Miss Wakefield said. "Let me call Jane Bemis."

A moment later the boys were following Miss Bemis through the stacks and downstairs, where the new microfile room had been cut out of a corner of the huge basement.

Miss Bemis had begun to talk as soon as Miss Wakefield told her the boys were interested in something to do with the microfile room, and she was still talking steadily.

"We don't do our own photography," she explained, as she opened a heavy door to disclose a concrete vault. "That's done for us outside. We store the rolls of film here." She pointed to the row of metal filing

THE MICROFILE ROOM

101

cabinets designed to hold the small cans of thirty-five-millimeter film.

Sandy looked at the label on the front of one of the cabinets. "The New York Times," he read.

Miss Bemis slid open the drawer and took from it a single can, opened the can, and held up a roll of film about four inches in diameter. "This little roll contains a full month of the Times. Isn't it remarkable?"

"It certainly is," Ken said. He was trying to find some way of letting Miss Bemis know that they weren't interested in the detailed mechanics of microfilming, which she obviously regarded as the most fascinating subject in the world. This new department was clearly her pride and joy. "If I were to come down here looking for a specific issue of the paper, how would I find it?" Ken asked.

"You wouldn't." She smiled at him. "You wouldn't be allowed in this room—not as a member of the general public, I mean. You'd ask me—or whatever librarian was on duty—and we'd come down here ourselves to get the roll you wanted."

"I see. Well—?"

"Then you'd put the roll on one of the viewing machines in the other room," Miss Bemis swept on. "You see, each frame of the film contains one page of the newspaper. As you wind the handle the film passes from one spool to the other, and the images of the pages pass across a viewing board at the bottom. You keep turning until you reach the particular page of the particular issue you want."

"Very neat," Sandy said admiringly. "Now suppose—"

102 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Sandy," Ken cut in firmly, "we don't want to take up any more of Miss Bemis' time than we have to." He smiled at the librarian. "Were you on duty here last night just before closing?"

"Why, yes, I was."

"Well, we'd like to find out if a tall, thin man came in here last night—if he used any of your films, and what they were. Do you suppose you'd remember?"

Miss Bemis smiled. The curious look with which she had greeted Ken's original question had fled as she recognized a further opportunity to describe the workings of her department. "I wouldn't have to remember," she said. "We have all users of the room sign a register, and they also sign the slips they make out to let vis know what films they want. Come over here to the desk and I'll show you." She hurried ahead of them.

Ken winked at Sandy. "If we find out what Fenton was looking at—!" he began quietly.

"Even if we learn what roll of film he had, how are we going to guess what item of what page of what issue of—"

"If we can't zip through whatever roll he was using, and spot some new clue to this business, I'll eat the roll, can and all."

Ken's last words were barely audible, as they approached the desk where Miss Bemis was opening her ledger. Her finger slid rapidly down the page of names as the boys came close enough to look over her shoulder.

"Well," Miss Bemis said, "the last person to use this

THE MICROFILE ROOM

103

room last night seems to have been a man named—let's see—Fenton."

"That's the man," Ken said, as calmly as he could. "Now if you could—"

But Miss Bemis had already picked up a sheaf of small slips of paper, bound together by an elastic. "Here are last night's call slips. Mr. Fenton seems to have been assigned to machine Number Two. And he was using"—she paused and wrinkled her brow as she deciphered the writing—"the Brentwood Advance for the month of May, year nineteen—" She broke off abruptly at the sight of Ken's face. "Are you all right?"

"He's a lot better now than he will be after he's eaten a roll of film," Sandy assured her. Then he added to Ken, disregarding the librarian's puzzled stare, "You did say new clue, didn't you?"

CHAPTER X

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE

Ken made an effort to swallow his disappointment. He looked as unhappy as if he were literally swallowing a can of film instead.

"This label on the can is right?" he asked. "The date couldn't be a mistake?" He had asked Miss Bemis for the roll of film Fenton had used, and now held it in his hand.

Miss Bemis drew her thin figure to its full height. "It certainly couldn't!" she exclaimed indignantly. "We're very careful in this department to avoid errors of any sort. You see, the company that makes the film puts the label on—two labels, to be exact. One here on the outside of the can." She took it from him as she spoke. "And the other, identical to it, inside on"—She was attempting to open the can, to illustrate her explanation, when her voice came to a puzzled

stop. "That's odd," she said suddenly.

She held the can up to a better light, and the boys could clearly see the band of transparent gummed tape that circled the joint between the lid and the body.

104

1

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE 105

"What's odd, Miss Bemis?" Ken asked quickly.

"Why, this can has never been unsealed! I'm afraid there has been some kind of error, after all.

Not in the date, but—" Her face had grown pink with embarrassment. "You see, we inspect each new film after it comes in—roll it straight through a machine, that is—and this tape seal is never put back on after a roll has been checked. It looks as if this roll had never been inspected! I simply can't—"

"You mean that roll has never been opened at all?" Ken asked. "That nobody could have looked at it last night?"

Miss Bemis shook her head worriedly. "I simply can't understand it! According to the call slip, this was the roll that Mr.—Mr.—"

"Fenton," Ken supplied hastily.

"Yes—that Mr. Fenton asked for. And yet we must have given him the wrong one by mistake. He couldn't have used this can. It has never been opened at all! Oh, dear! If there's an error in our call-slip records, and an error in our inspection record—I" She looked as if she might be about to burst into tears.

"There's probably some simple explanation," Sandy said, wishing he were somewhere else.

"I think probably the call-slip record is all right," Ken said. "I think Mr. Fenton got the film he asked for, but that he just didn't use it. That's why he didn't report to you that it was sealed. He hadn't even looked at it long enough to realize that."

Miss Bemis blinked her unhappy eyes. "He didn't use it?" she repeated. "Then why did he—?"

"This is just a guess," Ken admitted. "But if he

106 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

wanted an excuse to use the reading machine, he'd have to ask for something." Miss Bemis was still looking at him as if she had no idea what he was talking about. "May we take a look at the machines?" Ken asked.

"If one roll got past our inspection—" Miss Bemis began. Then, belatedly, she seemed to realize what Ken had asked. "Yes—yes, of course. Any member of the public is welcome. You'll find the directions on the little notice at the right. And now if you'll excuse me I'd like to institute a thorough check immediately. I felt so sure this department was entirely . . ." The rest of her sentence was lost to them. Miss Bemis was already through the door, leaving them alone.

"Whew!" Sandy let out his breath. "Did you have to get her so upset?"

"It wasn't my fault," Ken pointed out. "Come on. Let's take a look at machine Number Two right away."

"What are we looking for?"

"Who knows?" Ken stopped in front of the center machine in a row of three. It stood, like the others, on a small table built to accommodate its bulk. Ken looked at the spindles atop the black shape. "Do you know how these things operate?" he asked Sandy.

"I think so. Let's see . . ." Sandy studied it carefully. "The film is threaded between these glass plates, so that the powerful lamp above casts an enlarged image of it down here." He pointed to the silver-painted lower surface. "It works pretty much on the same principle as my enlarger does—except that this is made to take one size of film only, and of course you don't print with it." Then he looked up at Ken curi-

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE 107

ously. "So what does that tell us about the Plunket payroll robbery?"

Ken's eyes were bright with excitement. "If Fenton didn't use this machine to look at that roll of

film, what did he use it for?"

"That's such a good question, I'll just let you answer it yourself. I wouldn't want to—"

"No—I want you to answer it," Ken said insistently. "You're the photographer. What could he use this machine for, except to read a roll of Miss Bemis' microfilm, which apparently he didn't do?"

"Oh." Sandy began to look interested. He studied the machine in silence for a moment. "He could have projected the image of any negative that would fit into the machine," he said slowly.

"And if—"

Sandy turned his head suddenly. "That envelope!" He almost shouted. "The one he took out of my hand! There could have been a negative in there—a negative showing something so small, or so reduced in size, that he had to enlarge it in here in order to see whatever he wanted to see!"

Ken grabbed his shoulder. "Now we're getting some place!" He shoved Sandy around to face the machine again. "Go on. See if you can find some evidence that that's what he did."

"There won't be any evidence," Sandy protested. "It would be perfectly simple to slip a negative in here." He looked at the two glass plates designed to hold the film flat, and worked the lever that separated them and brought them together again. "Nothing would show afterward if you . . ." He hesitated and scratched his head.

108 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

When he looked up at Ken he sounded apologetic. "It doesn't make any sense, after all," he said. "If all Fenton wanted to do was to enlarge some negative so that he could see it more clearly, all he'd have to do would be to hold it up to the light and look at it through any cheap magnifying glass. He wouldn't have to go to all the trouble of coming in here and—"

Ken's face had fallen. "Are you sure?"

"Unless—"

"Go ahead. After all, we know he was here. He—" Ken broke off as Sandy's brows wrinkled in concentration.

"Unless he wanted to trace an enlarged image of whatever he had on his negative," Sandy concluded. "This machine would make it easy to do that." He thought for a minute more. "Of course the simplest thing to do would be to have the negative printed up—to get a picture of the thing, made in any size he wanted. But if he couldn't do that for some reason, he could get the same general effect by projecting his negative on a piece of paper stuck in here"—he pointed to the silvered lower surface—"and following all the lines with a pencil. If it were anything elaborate—like a picture of a person, for example—it would be a long job and probably wouldn't turn out very well. But if it were something simpler—like a map or a diagram—" His voice trailed off. He shrugged. "That's all I can think of."

"Something simple. Like a map." Ken repeated the words almost automatically, and his fist beat a soft tattoo on the table. Suddenly he struck it vehemently. "A map! That's it! I'll bet that's it!"

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE 109

"Why a map? What for?" There was doubt in Sandy's words, but his voice betrayed that he had caught some of Ken's excitement.

"To show where he hid the money, of course. He—"

Sandy's excitement died. "You're crazy," he said scornfully. "Anybody smart enough to get away with the theft of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars is certainly smart enough to remember afterward where he put it."

"Not necessarily. Not if it's in a maze of woods where every spot looks pretty much like every other spot. Of course he might have marked the place, but that would have been risky. Other people could notice the mark too. Or he could have kept a sort of description of how to get there. You know, one hundred paces north, turn right. . . . But a map would be the easiest thing."

Ken had been speaking rapidly, his words tumbling over each other. But now he stopped.

"No," he said slowly, after a moment's blank pause. "It doesn't make sense."

"Now what?" Sandy demanded. "It was just beginning to make sense. I can see where he might have to—"

"No. It would have been too risky. If he'd had a thing like that with him when he was arrested, the police would have found it—and it would have been a dead giveaway. If he didn't have it with him, where was it?"

"He could have hidden it."

"Where?" Ken sounded disgusted with Sandy and with himself. "Alongside the money? That would have been a big help."

110

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Maybe he mailed it to somebody to hold for him."

Ken shook his head. "He had no friends—he always worked alone. And he wouldn't have trusted anybody who wasn't a friend." He slumped against the table.

"We're on the wrong track."

Sandy suddenly laughed. "Look," he said, "what are we worrying about? He had it—whether it was a map or whatever it was, and wherever he got it—he had it. There was something in that envelope. And if it was a negative—no matter what it was a negative of—he could have used it in this machine. We don't have to worry about where it came from—only about what it

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was.

Ken thought for a long moment. "You're right," he said finally. "Whatever it was, he had it. And because he used this machine, let's go on assuming it was a negative—of something." He was speaking slowly now, forcing his thoughts to be logical. "Richards said they lost Fenton for a couple of hours in Newark the other day. That would have been time enough for Fenton to have something photographed. Wouldn't it?"

"Sure. Especially if he didn't want a print made—if he only wanted the negative. But—"

Ken interrupted, following his own train of thought. "But what could he have had with him all along—something that looked so innocent that the police would have let him keep it—which, when it was photographed, would look like something else? A map of the hiding place, for example."

"Wait a minute," Sandy said. "That brings us back to the old problem. Why did he have to look at his negative through this machine? Why project it on—?"

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE 111

Ken grabbed his arm. "Project it on what? That's it!"

"Huh?"

"Two things—each of them perfectly innocent-looking. Don't you see? When one of them is projected on the other, in here"—Ken pointed to the machine—"they give him what he wants! Suppose he takes an ordinary map of Kensho Park—he'd know he could always pick one up some place—and puts it down here." He indicated the silvered surface at the base of the machine. "Then he projects his negative on it—a negative of this thing he had with him all along. Maybe it's just a fancy necktie, but something about the design points out the spot on the map that—"

Sandy's voice sounded very flat after Ken's eagerness. "He was wearing a plain black necktie."

"Don't take me so literally. Besides, he could have had another one in his pocket. Or it could have been anything. A—a—"

They stared at each other for a long startled moment.

When they spoke, finally, it was in unison.

"A ring!" Ken whispered it. Sandy's voice was a thin croak.

"The coils of the snake—" Sandy said.

"Traced on an ordinary map—"

Miss Bemis' precise heels tapped into the room. "I just wanted to let you know—" she began, and stopped.

The boys had both turned on her so swiftly that she backed away.

"Miss Bemis," Ken asked her, "did Fenton—that man who came in here last night—have a map with him? Or did he ask for a map? Do you remember?"

112 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

The intensity of his voice drove her another step backward, and her round eyes declared that she thought they had both gone mad. "A map?" she repeated. "I don't— Why?"

"Try to remember," Sandy pleaded. "If he didn't ask you for it, maybe you saw him take something out of his pocket. Maybe—"

"There was just the pamphlet," Miss Bemis said. "The one that was lying beside the machine when I followed him in here to ask if he knew how to operate it."

"What kind of pamphlet?" Ken wasn't even aware that he had rudely interrupted her.

"Oh—just a pamphlet." Her voice sounded vague. "I didn't particularly notice, you know. He was rather abrupt. When I offered to help him he was almost impolite." She took another step backward then, as if she had recovered enough to realize that Ken and Sandy were being rather impolite too.

Ken tried to make his voice and manner calm. "But it wasn't one of the library's own pamphlets, was it, Miss Bemis? It wasn't just the little leaflet"—he gestured toward the other room—"that you have out there, describing the microfilm collection?"

"Oh, no. This one had a red-and-green cover—divided diagonally, I think. I remember it looked very familiar to me. I've seen pamphlets like that before. But exactly what it was—" She shook her head, and then she smiled brightly. "I'm sorry not to be able to help you. What I came to tell you was that I've devised a new checking system, so that these troublesome errors won't occur again. I wouldn't want you to

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE 113

think—" She broke off, looking startled again. The boys had both started for the door.

"We're very grateful, Miss Bemis," Ken said. "You've been a great help to us."

"It was a wonderful error," Sandy said. "I mean—"

"He means it's a wonderful department you've got here, Miss Bemis. Brentwood is certainly lucky to have it. Thanks very much," Ken added, as Sandy pulled him through the door and tore for the stairs.

At the top they slowed to a less conspicuous fast walk.

"State colors," Sandy was saying, slightly out of breath. "Diagonally divided. Standard design for state park information folders. He—"

They were approaching the main desk and Miss Wakefield had looked up to smile at them.

"Did you find what you wanted, Sandy?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Wakefield. Miss Bemis was very helpful. Just what we wanted." He put on his best smile. "Do you have any of the state park folders here?"

"Right over there." She glanced toward a rack on the far wall. "I believe we have the full collection. And they're so attractive, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes. They certainly are." Sandy had to raise his voice on the last words. He and Ken were already across the room.

It took them exactly one second to find the Kenshoa Park folder among all the others. In another second they had opened it to the two maps folded inside.

"Maps!" Sandy breathed. "Nice pretty maps!"

One was of the entire state, indicating the location of Kenshoa Park and the roads leading to it. The other

114 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

was of the park itself, and gave in detail all the roads, camping areas, streams, and other points of interest to the visitor.

Sandy suddenly closed it and put it back on its rack. "Let's go get our own so we can really study it. Twenty-five cents at any newsstand. Come on."

Fifteen minutes later they were in Sandy's darkroom, the Kenshoa Park map from the pamphlet they had just bought spread out before them on the table. They had agreed that the second map, of the entire state, was far less likely to be of value to them.

"What we're looking for," Ken said, bending over it, "is a road that resembles the twisting and turns of the cobra on the ring."

"Or a brook," Sandy added. "Or a path."

"Check. How do we—?"

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Ken stopped as he saw that Sandy was reaching for the negative he had made the night before and was inserting it into his enlarger.

"Might as well have this where we can see it," Sandy said.

The image of the cobra appeared on the easel when he turned on the light, and Sandy adjusted the machine to bring it into sharp focus. The cobra's head stood upright above an intricate double coil—one loop smaller and slightly to one side of the other—and below the loops the rest of the body curved back and forth three times before a final small loop just short of the end.

"I remember thinking that seemed like a funny way for a snake to be coiled," Sandy muttered.

"But I thought it was just because I don't know much about cobras." He took the map from the table and laid it

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE 115

flat on the easel, so that the image of the snake was superimposed on it, with the snake's head touching the top margin of the map and the tip of its tail the bottom. "Now all we have to do is move the map around until the image coincides with something on it."

"Maybe it'll never coincide with anything while it's that size," Ken suggested. "Maybe we need a small image to—"

"We'll start like this and work down. Once we know the snake design well enough, we may notice something that looks like it. Then we can adjust the image and see if it really does match. Let's go."

But an hour later they turned the room light on and both blinked their eyes wearily. They had studied every road, path, and brook in the entire park, but none of them—in part or in entirety—resembled the particular curves and twists of the cobra.

"We're getting nowhere fast," Sandy said with a sigh. "The idea sounded so good back there in the library, but—"

Ken rubbed the back of his stiff neck. "We can't give up yet. Maybe it is the state map, after all. Let's try."

"O.K." Sandy made the substitution and turned off the light.

But when he turned it on the next time they were no further ahead. Not a single road, or section of road on the state map, matched the cobra's coils.

Ken slumped into a chair. "All right," he said. "I'll admit it's not working out. Fenton just happens to like rings with snakes carved on them. Whatever he had in that envelope—and whatever he was doing in the microfilm room—"

116 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Oh, brother!" Sandy's exclamation was half a groan. "If I bend way over, will you kick me—hard?" He pulled the negative out of the enlarger and stared at it.

"It's a welcome suggestion—but why?" Ken's sudden new alertness contradicted the words.

"I took a picture of the impression of the ring—not of the ring itself."

"I know you did. So what?"

"So everything! So I'm a dope! Look," Sandy went on, "the impression is backwards, so I should have reversed the negative in the enlarger to compensate. Get it?"

"No."

Sandy stared at him exasperatedly. "You don't? Now concentrate. If there'd been a number on

that ring—the numeral five, for example—it would have been backwards in the mud. Right? The way you'd see a five in the mirror."

"O.K. Go on."

"So our mud impression was a reverse image. But when I photographed it and got a negative, I reversed it again. You know all negatives are reverses of the original. So—now comes the dopey part—when I put the negative in the enlarger, I put it in as I always do, to make the image come out like the original. Which means I reversed it a third time. And that makes it exactly the opposite of what Fenton would have had, if he'd photographed the ring itself instead of an impression of it!"

Ken looked at him in silence for a moment, his mind going over the backward-forward triple-reverse reasoning Sandy had just presented to him.

THE COILS OF THE SNAKE 117

"Are you trying to tell me," he asked finally, "that the snake's curves, as we've been projecting them, are backwards?"

"Of course! What did you think?"

"Then why didn't you just say so?" Ken grinned. "Come on. Turn it over!"

Sandy grinned back, turned the negative over, and reinserted it in the enlarger.

They put the map of Kenshoa Park back on the easel. After a fruitless half-hour they exchanged it for the map of the state.

At the end of another half-hour their eyes were smarting and their muscles cramped. And they were utterly discouraged.

"Backwards — forwards — upside-down — down-side-up," Ken said bitterly. "It makes no difference. There's no road or path or brook or anything that fits that snake."

"And," Sandy added glumly, "vice versa."

CHAPTER XI

WET PAINT COMES OFF

"let's be sensible about this, Ken." Sandy's chin rested on his hand as he leaned his elbow on the counter of the little lunchroom half a block from the office. "So Fenton outsmarted us. Does that mean our lives are over? Cheer up! He seems to have outsmarted Richards

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too.

There had been no further word from the Security Indemnity detective, from which they had deduced that Richards was no nearer his goal than he had been early that morning—and that Fenton might already have picked up the money and made good his departure.

"I notice how cheerful you are," Ken answered, with a faint smile. He looked at the plate in front of Sandy. "I don't ever remember seeing you leave half a piece of pie before."

"I just haven't finished yet." But Sandy didn't pick up his fork again.

Ken poked his own fork at a piece of piecrust. "I'm

118

WET PAINT COMES OFF 119

not upset at being foxed by Fenton," he said, after a moment. "At least not so much that I can't get over it. But if he hasn't picked up the money yet—if he's still stalling around, the way he's done so far—" Ken sighed. "What really bothers me is the feeling that we are pretty close to something—and that we might as well be a million miles away. I'm still convinced that that snake ring is more than an ornament; that it's some kind of guidepost."

"Sure. But what's it guiding to?" Sandy slid off the counter stool and dug into his pocket for change. "Let's get back to the office and do our mourning where it doesn't interfere with Andy's restaurant business." He motioned toward a figure in blue denims who had just entered the door, and stood gazing around as if seeking some place to sit.

Ken roused himself and followed Sandy slowly outside. Customers leaving the lunchroom at the same time jostled him as they moved past, and he took a few steps to bring himself out of the

main stream of traffic. But on the far edge of the sidewalk Ken paused again, and leaned up against a small delivery truck parked there.

"A snake ring," he muttered to himself. "A snake ring. Are we absolutely on the wrong course? No, I don't think so," he answered himself. "I feel sure of th.it."

"All right," Sandy said pacifically. "You feel sure of it. Do you also feel like standing around here all—?"

But Ken was talking again. "If we're right about the ring, then we're wrong somewhere else. Let's give ourselves the benefit of every doubt, and say we're even right when we concluded it has something to do with a map." He looked up suddenly. "Are those maps

120 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

changed every year? Are there new editions? Because if there are—"

"They're not changed every year. I know that. We —the Advance, I mean—receives copies of new state publications, and I haven't seen any of those park pamphlets around lately at all. For years, I'd say." Then Sandy grabbed Ken's arm and dragged him away from the truck. The slight gray-haired man in the blue denims had left the lunchroom, with a big paper sack whose open top showed the wax-paper wrappings of several sandwiches, and the boys were impeding his way into the driver's seat. "Sorry," Sandy told him. "We don't seem to be able to keep out of your way."

"S'all right." The man nodded and got in, started his motor, and drove off.

"You're sure about that?" Ken asked.

"Yes. I'm sure." Sandy's impatience was growing. "Look," he said, "can't we—?"

"But the roads and paths and stuff in the park must be changed sometimes," Ken broke in persistently. "How would we go about finding out in a hurry what they used to be?"

"State Park Commission in the state capitol," Sandy told him.

"I said in a hurry. To go there and back would take us a day. Isn't there any quicker way?"

Sandy concentrated for a moment. "Dave Green was the road supervisor up at Kenshoa Park before he retired six or seven years ago. He might know something."

"Good! Where could we find him?"

"On McKinley Street—here in Brentwood."

WET PAINT COMES OFF 121

"Then come on!" Ken flashed him a brief cheerful grin and turned away to start across the street.

"Come on," he called back over his shoulder. "You going to stand around there all day?"

Sandy was laughing when he joined Ken on the far side of the street. "Hold it," he said. "Let me see you a minute." He took Ken's arm and swung him around. "Hiram's Hennerly—Fresh Eggs," he recited slowly.

"What? What are you—?"

"You've got paint on your back—nice neat letters, backward." Sandy laughed again. "I told you to come away from that truck. Must have had a newly painted sign on it."

Ken had been craning to look over his shoulder. Even at that awkward angle he could see the blur of white across the back of his leather jacket—a jacket the Aliens had given him the previous Christmas.

"Hey," he said seriously, "will it come off?"

"With turpentine or gasoline or something, I guess."

"There's gasoline in the shop, isn't there? Let's go do something with it right away before it dries."

"I thought you were in such a hurry to see Dave Green." Sandy had to lengthen his stride to keep up with Ken.

"I am also in a hurry to get this clean—this is my favorite jacket. Wouldn't you think people would keep their trucks at home until the paint dried?"

"No one told you to lean on the truck," Sandy said. "You know, if we'd thought of it we would have bought you a jacket with lettering on it. Looks right smart, pardner. 'Hiram's

Hennerly—Fresh Eggs.' Yes sir, even backwards, it looks right smart."

122 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Never mind that backward routine," Ken said. "I had enough of that this morning with the negative. Just lead me to some gasoline and Mr. Dave Green."

When they left the office ten minutes later Ken held his jacket in his hand, waving it gently to rid it of its penetrating gasoline odor. But by the time they pulled up in front of a small gray house on McKinley Street, the jacket was still highly aromatic. Ken left it in the car.

"No sense in incurring Mr. Green's irritation when we're about to ask him a favor," he murmured.

"I'm not sure Dave Green can be irritated," Sandy told him.

A few minutes afterward Ken was inclined to agree with him. The former park road supervisor was a vigorous man in his sixties, his face leathery from years of outdoor work, his eyes suggesting an easy good humor that would be difficult to shatter.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, when Sandy had explained their errand. He paused to tamp tobacco into his pipe. "There were some road changes during my time up there—quite a number of them." He got the pipe going and the air of his small study turned blue with its smoke.

"Thing was," he said, "some of the early roads in the park were too steep, too twisty. So we did a lot of straightening and grading. But that's about the size of it. Didn't actually make any new roads, as I recall."

Ken pulled Sandy's negative from his pocket and held it up against the light from the window, so that Green might see the image on it. "Would you remember if there was any road that looked like this—or any

WET PAINT COMES OFF

123

part of this? I mean, a road that had the same curves that this has."

Green smiled. "There's no excuse for roads as twisted as that, son. Matter of fact, we don't generally pattern our roadways after the coils of a snake."

"I know it sounds farfetched," Ken told him. "But we do have a real reason for asking."

Green waved his apology aside. "No need to explain. Perfectly willing to tell you anything I know without that. But the truth is roads are rarely twisted like that unless they're in high mountains, where switchbacks are needed. Of course you take a very old road, that just kind of came into being where there had been a horse track or a cattle trail—that's likely to wander a bit. But with modern machinery we've mostly smoothed them down to . . ." He paused, and then got up suddenly and crossed to a large map of Kenshoa Park hung on one wall of the room.

"When the state took over this land it was all crisscrossed by old trails," he murmured, "and I seem to remember— No, it doesn't show on this one. Wait a minute."

He left the room and they could hear his footsteps climbing the stairs. He returned a few minutes later with an armful of dusty rolled-up blueprints. "Just thought of these old things up in the attic. They might help."

The boys cleared a big desk at his direction, and then watched him unroll, glance at, and discard one blueprint after another.

"Here!" he said finally. "Help me get this thing flat."

When the big blueprint's corners had been weighted

124 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

down with an inkwell, an ash tray, a ruler, and a book, the boys bent over it eagerly.

"This is a map?" Sandy asked dubiously.

The thin white lines all over the paper formed curves and symbols and patterns quite unlike the road and river markings they were accustomed to.

"It's a large-scale surveyor's chart," Green explained. "An enlargement of one section of the regular park map—of this section here," he added, walking to the wall and sketching a rectangle at one edge of the park map there. "The territory on that chart is only about six hundred acres, lying along State Route 17, the east boundary of the park—at about the midway point, here

—for three-quarters of a mile, and extending west about a mile and a half to the far side of the Cave Hill picnic area."

He returned to stand between the boys looking down at the chart. "All those curved lines indicate elevation, of course. This kind of a line here"—he pointed with his pipe—"marks a trail."

Ken bent over to look closely at the spot Green indicated. "You mean that's a trail entering the park from the east? But I thought the entrances were on the north and south sides of the park?"

"The main entrances are," Green agreed. "This isn't exactly a public entrance. It was never marked on the maps—it's hardly worth marking, for that matter. It's not much more than a trail, and it's never been maintained beyond keeping it clear enough for fire fighters to get through if necessary.

"See, it follows the creek pretty much," he went on,

WET PAINT COMES OFF 125

moving his pipe along the faint white line. "Enters the park right alongside the creek, climbs pretty rapidly through here, and comes out—still alongside the creek—into the picnic clearing at the base of Cave Hill." He paused a moment. "I just thought the turns and twists in it might be what you boys are looking for."

Ken and Sandy had been eagerly studying the trail as he spoke, comparing it in their mind with the curves of the cobra. They hadn't needed Green's final suggestion.

But when Ken finally looked up he shook his head. "It's hard to tell," he muttered. "That section there looks right, but—"

"I know," Sandy agreed. "With all those other lines wandering around, crisscrossing the trail, it's hard to tell." He looked at the negative again, and then back at the chart.

"Why don't you take the blueprint along and check it properly?" Green suggested.

"Could we?" Ken asked eagerly.

"Why not?" Green smiled. "It's not so valuable I can't lend it to you for a while—but on one condition, of course."

"Anything you—"

"That when you bring it back you'll give me a complete story of what you're up to. I built roads for twenty-five years, but I never did see anybody trying to match one up to a snake before."

"It probably doesn't make any more sense than it sounds," Ken said. "But if it does work out—Anyway, we promise you the story."

126 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Ken held the tightly rolled cylinder of the blueprint in his hand a few minutes later when Sandy snapped the convertible into life.

"Don't spare the horses," Ken said. "I have a feeling we're getting somewhere."

Sandy edged away from the curb, looked behind, and pulled the car in a sharp U-turn. At the corner he slowed down, looked both ways, gunned the car across and almost immediately applied the brakes.

"I said don't spare the horses," Ken said. "I didn't say to make 'em do tricks."

"I know." But Sandy crept forward for part of the block, then abruptly made another U-turn and headed back for the corner. "Look down the side street," he said. "On the left as we cross."

Ken shot him a quick glance before he leaned forward to obey. "Blue sedan?"

Sandy shook his head. "Just watch." When they had crossed the intersection, he added, "See it?"

"I didn't see anything—except a small delivery truck," Ken said.

"That's right. A delivery truck. Hiram's Hennerly, I think."

"So? Did you think I wanted to press charges against them for having wet—?" Ken stopped.

"Oh, I see," he said, in another tone. "Your sixth sense is at work. You have seen a truck twice in one day, and therefore it has become highly suspicious." He grinned. "Sorry, my friend, but I don't think the one I just saw had any words painted on it at all—wet or dry."

Sandy had passed Green's house, turned right at the corner, and now turned right again. "O.K."

he said. "So

WET PAINT COMES OFF

127

I'm unduly suspicious. But I'm going around the block again, anyway."

But that time the little truck was nowhere in sight.

Ken leaned back with an elaborate sigh. "And now, if it isn't asking too much, do you suppose we could get back to the office and begin to study this chart?"

"All right—all right. A one-track mind, that's what you've got." Sandy let the car pick up speed.

But a few minutes later, when they entered the rear door of the Advance building, Sandy walked past the basement stairs and straight through the office to the front window. He looked out into the street for a moment, and then waved to Ken, who was waiting impatiently at the head of the stairs, to join him.

"Now what?" Ken asked, looking out at the nearly solid lines of parked cars along each sidewalk.

Sandy pointed. A small black delivery truck was backing into a snug parking space between two larger trucks, halfway down the block.

"Too bad," Ken said, with mock regret, after studying it for a moment. "It's the same kind of truck all right, but there's no lettering on the side. I'm afraid you've got to face it. Hiram's Hennery is innocent."

Sandy touched the leather jacket over Ken's arm. "Paint that comes off leather easily, also comes off anything else "

"But—"

"I told you the Rands would give up that blue sedan," Sandy went on. "And furthermore, Hiram—if it was Hiram—was in and out of Andy's in a great hurry. He didn't stay in the lunchroom long enough to eat anything."

128 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"True, absolutely true," Ken agreed. "But if you'll remember, he came out with a big bag of sandwiches. He hadn't gone in to eat."

"True, absolutely true," Sandy mocked. "He came out with—to use your own words—a big bag of sandwiches. Much too big for one man. Maybe not too big for two, though. And—"

"Hi, Sandy! Hi, Ken!" One of the Advance news* boys slammed through the door and came toward them. "I've been looking for you to—"

"Willie, do us a favor, will you?" Sandy said quickly.

"Huh? Sure. Especially if you—"

"Walk down the street past that little black truck down there. See if you can find out if there's anybody in the back of it."

Willie was puzzled but obliging. "Sure," he said. "And if there is, I'll ask 'em to buy a chance on our raffle." He grinned. "That's what I was going to ask you. This raffle here—" He reached into his pocket.

"Later," Sandy said firmly. "Go look in the truck first. If there's nobody but a driver, O.K. But if there is somebody else, walk on around the block and come in the back way."

"O.K."

Willie slammed out through the door again. They watched his progress down the block, saw him stop and sell one of his tickets to a woman shopper, and then continue to the black truck. He stuck his head through its open window.

They could see him pull his raffle book out of his pocket and hand it through the opening. A moment later he stepped away from the truck, turned his back

WET PAINT COMES OFF

129

on the Advance, and disappeared out of sight around the next corner.

Ken and Sandy were waiting at the back door when he ran across the parking area.

"I sold 'em three chances!" Willie's round face was beaming. "One to the little man in

overalls—the one in the driver's seat. And one each to the two men in back. They sounded sore at me at first, but when I told 'em all about the raffle—how it's for the hospital wing and all—they changed their minds. Boy! Three chances!" He was so pleased he had forgotten his original puzzlement over the reason for his errand. "Now what about you two?" he went on. "You're going to buy some too, aren't you?"

"Sure." Sandy's hand reached toward his pocket.

"Sure," Ken agreed.

"Gee, thanks!" Willie began to fill out the stubs. "I knew I could depend on you two. You're always taking chances."

Ken's eyes met Sandy's over Willie's head. "Ain't it the truth?" he murmured.

CHAPTER XII

THE STATION WAGON AGAIN

Willie ran off across the parking area with his now half-empty book of raffle tickets. Sandy looked down at the stubs of his and Ken's tickets, and folded them carefully as if they were the most valuable things in the world. Ken whistled tunelessly, his eyes focused on space.

"Cozy," Sandy said, watching his fingers crease the paper, "having the Rands still around." He tucked the folded tickets into his shirt pocket.

Ken stopped whistling. "Very cozy." He glanced over his shoulder toward the pressroom, from which issued the familiar odor of hot lead and the dull mechanical rumble of machinery in motion. "I'm glad Pop hires linotype operators and pressmen in large sizes," he said. "If the Rands should decide to visit us here, they'd find we had reserves on hand. But somehow I don't believe they'll pay us a public call," he added.

"I don't either."

"So let's forget about them for a while and adjourn to the darkroom," Ken said firmly. "I'd still like to know

130

THE STATION WAGON AGAIN 131

if the curves of Fenton's snake and the curves of Mr. Green's trail have more than a passing resemblance to each other." At the head of the stairs he added over his shoulder, "Who knows? Soon we may actually have the kind of valuable information the Rands seem to think we've had all along."

Half an hour later they turned off the enlarger and turned on the ceiling light. On the blueprint, which had been tacked flat on the enlarger easel, Ken had traced the entire snake. Now he looked down at his handiwork with satisfaction. The cobra's head lay near Route 17, at the edge of the park, and its body looped and curved back into the area of the park itself. "I knew it," Ken said. "I knew this would work!" "You call that working?" There was both scorn and regret in Sandy's voice. "Exactly three curves of the snake coincide with three curves in the trail—and that small section of the trail can't be more than five hundred feet long—out of a couple of miles," he added.

"But those three curves are half the snake's body," Ken pointed out. "Look—all the way from those two big loops not far from the head to the tiny loop just above the tip of the tail. The only thing that worries me now," he went on, "is that Fenton's gone up this trail, found his money, and departed hours ago for parts unknown, while poor Richards watches the two main entrances."

"I see. All your figuring is perfect, but—"

"Of course," Ken interrupted thoughtfully, "if we found the place where the money had been hidden—after it was gone, I mean—at least we'd get a story. I suppose Fenton would be careful about leaving evi-

132 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

dence around, but I think it's worth going up there to investigate. Besides, maybe he hasn't

picked it up yet, for some reason."

"For Pete's sake!" Sandy slumped into a chair and stared at him. "When you once take hold of an idea, you certainly hang on, don't you? Look!" He pointed dramatically to the blueprint.

"That trail twists and winds back and forth about two hundred times. It's only reasonable that the curves of the snake might happen to coincide with a couple of those twists. But that's all it amounts to—it's a coincidence!"

"But they match perfectly!"

"Oh, sure! I won't argue with you on that. But just suppose for a minute you're right—and that Fenton went to all the trouble of having this ring designed to follow those three little curves. Then what? You talk about investigating, but what are you going to investigate? Do you plan to dig up all the ground along both sides of those five hundred feet of trail?"

"Certainly not." Ken sat down opposite him. "It's clear to me that the three coinciding curves mark the general location and that the specific location is something Fenton could trust to his memory. Maybe he planted the money at the beginning of the spot where the snake and the trail coincide. Or maybe it's at the end. Or maybe it's right here"—he pointed—"where the tail of the snake turns right back on itself, and bisects that last curve. That gives us three possible locations." He waited for Sandy to comment, and when the redhead remained silent he added, after a moment, "Well, it's certainly better than having to search the whole park. Unless, of course, you have a better idea."

THE STATION WAGON AGAIN 133

Sandy ignored the sarcasm of the last words. "As a matter of fact, I have a swell idea. I just don't have any evidence to support it. And I like evidence," he added pointedly.

"If your idea's so good, let's hear it."

"Well," Sandy said slowly, "I've been waiting all along for somebody—Richards, say—to suggest that Fenton hid his money in one of the caves of Cave Hill. It seems to me—"

Ken didn't let him get any further. He was on his feet. "Of course! Caves! They're a natural hiding place." He was bending over the blueprint again, seeking out the spot he had looked at only casually before—the spot marked Cave Hill Picnic Area.

"The snake's got nothing to do with the caves," Sandy warned him, still in his chair. "It was the first thing I checked for, but it's no good. The snake ends way below Cave Hill, the way we've got it placed to match the curves in the trail."

"O.K." Ken said. "So I've been wrong all along. The curves are pure coincidence. The caves sound like a much better possibility." He straightened up. "Let's go investigate 'em right now." Sandy shook his head. "You speak with the blissful-ness of ignorance. There are approximately one hundred and fifty caves in that area—from a size about big enough for a rabbit to a size that would hold the state capitol and then some. They're scattered around all over a heavily wooded hill. It would take days to find them all—weeks, probably. Some of the big ones have been fitted up with lights. Some are so dangerous—from falling rock and stuff—that they've been blocked up for

134 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

years." He shook his head again. "Fenton may have been stalling around for days before picking up his money, but I don't think he's going to wait long enough for us to go through all those caves and find the particular one he used—if any."

Ken took three long strides, found himself at the wall of the small darkroom, and turned to stride three steps in the other direction.

"You're just manufacturing difficulties," he said. "First of all, we can eliminate the caves that have been equipped with lights. Presumably they're open to the public and visited regularly. Fenton wouldn't try to hide so much as a penny in a place like that."

"Fine." Sandy eyed him sidewise. "I think there are about a dozen of those. That leaves us only about one hundred and forty to locate and explore."

Ken paced to the end of the darkroom and back once more. "All right," he said finally. "A

hundred and forty —so what? If we eliminate the barricaded ones—" He stopped. "When did the barricades go up, do you know? Recently?"

"Not very recently, but I'm not sure just when. I suppose a few at a time were blocked off when they became dangerous."

Ken studied the floor. "I suppose we wouldn't dare eliminate any of them, in that case. A barricade probably wouldn't stop Fenton, anyway. He might even prefer it." He sighed and lowered himself into his chair. "If only the snake fitted some trail in the cave section. . . ."

"Sure. If only." Sandy grinned briefly. "Or if only we

THE STATION WAGON AGAIN 135

could trust Fenton to have marked his cave with a nice big X."

There was silence in the little darkroom for the space of two long minutes.

"You don't suppose," Ken said finally, "that somewhere along the trail—along the snake section of the trail, that is—there's a secret trail going off that heads directly to some cave? It might be marked in a special way that wouldn't ordinarily be noticed—notches on trees, or stones at regular intervals, or something. But Fenton could follow it because he'd know where it started. How does that sound?"

"Frankly, a little too much like Edgar Allan Poe to be good. Of course," Sandy added slowly, "it makes sense that Fenton should have marked the location of his cave somehow—always provided he used a cave, that is. If he didn't know just how to get to it, when he was ready to go back for his loot, he'd be in almost the same spot we are. The way those entrances are scattered around—and all overgrown and hidden behind bushes and trees—he'd have trouble finding a place five minutes after he'd left it. Let alone five years later."

Ken stood up, put his hands in his pockets, took them out again, and sat down. "I still think the snake is significant some way," he muttered, half to himself. "And yet I think the caves sound like a natural hiding spot. If only—"

"You're beginning to repeat yourself," Sandy told him.

"Look." Ken sounded suddenly decisive. "We've done enough talking and enough stewing around. Let's go

136 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

take a look at Kenshoa Park. We might just drive up that trail, and—and— Maybe one of the spots I mentioned before—at the beginning of the coinciding curves, or at the end of them, or at that place where the snake's tail loops back and cuts right across a curve— maybe at one of those places we might see something that would give us a hint."

He met Sandy's unenthusiastic glance. "And if we don't find anything," Ken hurried on, "we could at least look up Richards and find out what he's doing." He brightened suddenly. "Maybe the fact that we haven't heard from him means that he's really on Fenton's trail—that he's too busy to bother telephoning."

Sandy didn't answer for a long moment. "Were you thinking of taking the Rands along?" he asked finally.

Ken grinned. He knew Sandy hadn't been entirely convinced by his logic. But he knew too that Sandy was as weary of inaction as he was himself.

"With your skill at losing the swarms of people who are always following you around—" he began.

"We could drive the car over to Joe's garage and pretend we were leaving it there for a grease job or something." Sandy spoke thoughtfully, but there was a glint in his eye. "Hiram's Hennery will no doubt trail us over there, and we'll let them watch us walk back to the office. They will then think we are immobilized, without a car. And"—he was getting to his feet and beginning to remove the thumbtacks that held the chart down—"they will probably not be quick enough to see us leave immediately afterward by the rear door. We'll tear back to Joe's by a back street, grab the car again— presto!"

THE STATION WAGON AGAIN

137

The light snapped out under his hand as he said the last word and the boys both started for the door. Ken had the rolled up blueprint in his hand, and Sandy carried his camera and flash gun. "Remarkable strategy, maestro, remarkable!" Ken congratulated him as they clattered up the stairs. "And if we should happen to murmur something vague to Joe about a phone call from New York, when we go back to get the car, he might just happen to repeat it to the Rands—and they might just happen to take off for the highway to New York."

"Such things do happen." Sandy handed Ken the car keys. "Make sure the field glasses and the flashlight are in the car, while I call Mom and tell her we won't be home for supper."

It was three o'clock when they pulled away from Joe's gas station and headed for Kenshoa Park. It still lacked fifteen minutes of four when Sandy slowed the car down where Route 17 skirted the edge of the park. The heavy woods to their right were in sharp contrast to the sunny tilled fields on the opposite side of the road.

"Our trail enters alongside a brook," Ken reminded him. "So if we watch for a brook—there's probably a bridge on the road there—we ought to be right."

"Bridge coming up," Sandy said a moment later.

He stopped the car near the small concrete span and Ken got out to inspect the thick growth on either side of it for some sign of an opening. When he waved Sandy on, the convertible came up to where he stood, and Ken pointed to the two faint overgrown ruts running back among the trees.

"The road must be passable," Ken said. "Someone's

138 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

used it recently." He got back into the car. "There's quite a drop to the ditch, and then a sharp rise beyond."

The engine took the incline easily, and the car nosed into the trees. Sandy winced occasionally when a low branch promised to scratch the convertible's paint, but on the whole the trail was perfectly passable.

Ken held the blueprint open on his knees, counting the twists in the tiny road to mark their progress. Most of them were on up grades and very sharp. One of them, Ken noticed, was a complete switchback; suddenly they were traveling some two hundred feet directly above the section they had just traversed, and in the opposite direction. Sometimes the trail hugged rock walls, sometimes it lay in a little valley choked by the leaves of many years, but always it went up. When they had covered some three of the four miles of the trail's length, Ken said suddenly, "Hold it! Right up at that next curve is where the snake's curves begin to fit."

Sandy braked the car to a slow stop, shut off the engine, and let the quiet of the forest settle down around them. For a moment neither of them moved. High above their heads bronze oak leaves rustled faintly in a breeze, and somewhere off to one side there was the low gurgle of the stream. But despite these small noises the place had a deep, almost uncanny stillness. This part of Kenshoa Park was clearly not often disturbed by visitors.

"Well," Ken said finally, "shall we get out and take a look around?"

"Sure." Sandy opened his door. "I take it we are

THE STATION WAGON AGAIN 139

searching for notched trees, bent saplings, piled stones—or what have you?"

"Especially what have you," Ken agreed. Suddenly he felt that his idea, which had sounded so logical back in the Advance darkroom, was even more ridiculous than Sandy had clearly thought it. But he determined to give it a chance and circled the area slowly, looking for any unusual sign that might be taken for a trail marker.

Sandy, equally conscientious, walked in the opposite direction. They didn't speak. Even when they passed each other Ken managed to be looking at the ground.

"Shall we go around again?" Sandy asked politely, when they met back at the car.

"No." Ken got in and Sandy settled beside him. "I never thought the beginning of the coinciding curves was the most logical place, anyway."

"What's our next stop?" Sandy asked.

Ken was tempted to say "Let's forget it and go look for Richards," but instead he replied, "I'll let you know when we've come to the place on the trail where the snake's tail cuts across it."

It was about three minutes later when he motioned to Sandy to stop again.

"Right at the center of the curve—there where that big oak is—looks as if it ought to be the place," Ken said, taking one last look at his chart with its superimposed drawing of the coiled snake.

But this time, when the car's motor died, the silence was not so deep as it had been before. For a moment the boys looked at each other, unable immediately to understand the difference.

140 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Then Sandy said, "I hear music. Very faint."

"That's what it is!"

They got out of the car and stood irresolute, glancing around. The woods still seemed as heavy and deserted as they had elsewhere on the trail, but the sound of music was evidence that there were people somewhere, not far off.

"Car radio, maybe," Sandy said quietly. "Might be just around this corner somewhere."

"But Green said this trail wasn't used, except by fire fighters."

For some reason which Ken couldn't explain even to himself, the sound of music in these quiet woods was vaguely sinister. He had a sudden impulse to get back into the car and return the way they had come, as fast as possible. He told himself firmly that he was being ridiculous—that innocent picnickers might perfectly well have strayed into this wildest part of the park—but nevertheless he had instinctively lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

"Let's walk up a little way, until we can see around the curve." Sandy whispered too.

Ken nodded, and they started forward, moving quietly on the layers of sodden leaves. The music was still audible, sometimes fainter, sometimes louder. It occurred to Ken that if it did come from a car radio just ahead it should hold to a more consistent volume. He had just decided that it was a wind-borne sound, originating perhaps a long distance away, when Sandy stopped him with a hand on his arm.

They had reached a spot on the trail where they could look several hundred feet ahead, and there was

THE STATION WAGON AGAIN 141

no car in sight. Ken glanced around, and then looked at Sandy curiously.

Sandy pointed off the road, at a spot about a dozen yards ahead.

Ken followed his glance, seeing nothing for a moment except the bushy crimson-leaved sumac that edged the trail there.

And then his eyes suddenly focused beyond the sumac, and his heart missed a beat.

They had caught up with Fenton's station wagon at last.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RANDES FIND THE TRAIL

Ken left the trail in a single crablike leap that carried him into the concealing weeds, jerking Sandy with him as he went.

Then they waited there, perfectly still, every sense alert.

The silence was complete, except for the soft murmur of the stream somewhere below them.

Not a twig crackled, not a leaf stirred.

And the music was no longer audible.

Slowly Ken collected his panic-scattered thoughts. The station wagon, he told himself, was empty; their leap into hiding had been as unnecessary as it was dramatic.

"Pardon the instinctive reaction," he said, a little sheepishly.

"Don't mention it." Sandy grinned. "I had the same idea myself. You just helped me carry it out." Then he too looked sheepish. "Looks like maybe you were right about this section of the trail being important."

142

THE RANDS FIND THE TRAIL

143

Together they leaned forward and peered around a big clump of laurel until the hood of the station wagon was visible.

"It also looks," Sandy went on, "as if Fenton hadn't picked up his money yet—or that wouldn't still be here. Unless," he added thoughtfully, "he's just abandoned the car."

"If I were abandoning a car," Ken said, "I wouldn't take the trouble to back it off a road. I'd just run it in nose first—the easiest way."

Sandy nodded. "That makes sense."

"Let's go look her over—see if that tells us anything."

Ken nodded, and together they moved back toward the trail, pausing before they came out into the open to assure themselves once more that no one else was in sight.

"Tell me again," Sandy murmured, as they crossed the little road on a long diagonal toward the spot where the station wagon stood, "about how Fenton used a fake gun in that holdup. I know he isn't hiding in there waiting for us, but I feel like Sitting Duck just the same."

When they neared the station wagon they noticed two small brown birds perched on the radiator, preening their feathers. But the birds noticed the boys' presence in the same instant, and fluttered quickly up and away.

"Sitting bird not afraid of car. Sitting Duck not afraid now either," Sandy said with a grin.

They circled the car first, looking unsuccessfully for any telltale indications of Fenton's recent presence, and then Ken opened the front door on the driver's side. On

144 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

the floor was the plaid jacket and red cap Fenton had worn the night before, and on the seat were two small canvas traveling bags—both obviously new and inexpensive.

Ken lifted the bags in turn. "Empty," he said. "For the money, I suppose."

"And he carried them inside his jacket to give him that magnificent figure that impressed us so much last night."

There was nothing else inside the car. After a moment they closed the door and stepped back once more onto the trail, puzzled, but convinced at least that Fenton had not abandoned the car—that he intended to use it again.

"Why?" Sandy wondered aloud. "He's had plenty of time. Why hasn't he already picked up the money and gone?"

"I give up," Ken admitted. "Something's holding him up. He— Listen, there's that music again." They still had to strain their ears to catch the faint sound, and after a moment they agreed that it came from a considerable distance, and was audible only when the breeze was in the right direction.

"From over in the campers' area, probably," Sandy said. "I'm glad we heard it though—or we'd never have found the car. I am now," he went on, in a mock pompous tone, "entirely convinced of the validity of your theory. And I am consequently of the opinion that we should proceed without further delay to follow the course so dramatically indicated by the snake's tail crossing the road at this point."

They had reached the convertible again as he finished speaking, and Ken grinned at him as he handed Sandy the blueprint.

THE RANDS FIND THE TRAIL

145

ished speaking, and Ken grinned at him as he handed Sandy the blueprint.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, pardner," he said. "At the moment I'm not convinced of anything, but as long as we're here we might as well try it. I'll get the glasses and a flashlight out of the car."

Sandy glanced upward as Ken reached in to open the glove compartment. "Good idea," he muttered. "It won't be light much longer." Then Sandy unrolled the blueprint and studied it, turning it and himself until he was facing into the woods at the angle the snake's tail crossed the road according to Ken's sketch. "Right through here," he said, pointing.

"Right," Ken agreed, rejoining him. "Ready?"

They pushed through the roadside weeds and entered the woods. Almost immediately the land began to rise, and before they were fifty feet from the trail they were almost half that distance above it. Already it was dusky under the trees, and dry foliage stirred furtively above their heads and under their feet.

After a few moments they stopped to catch their breath on the steep rocky grade made treacherous by the deep-piled accumulation of many years' leaves. Another faint snatch of music came to their ears, but otherwise the forest was silent. They had seen nothing which might be interpreted as a trail marker.

"If we're only supposed to go the distance indicated by the snake's tail," Sandy said, "we ought not to have much farther. If the scale is correct, the tail ends about five hundred feet off the road."

"That's the way I figured," Ken agreed. "If we don't see anything significant by then—"

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146 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Sandy, who had started on again ahead of him, stopped abruptly. "Look," he said, indicating a spot some feet ahead.

Ken followed his pointing finger and saw a small branch ripped almost entirely from a sapling—hanging from it only by a shred of bark. He stared at it intently.

"The wood looks fresh and white," Ken said quietly. "It can't have been torn very long ago."

Sandy nodded. "More and more I like your theory," he said. "But less and less do I like following it up."

Cautiously they circled the sapling, and just to the right of it they found a deep scar in the surface of a smooth damp mat of leaves.

"He—somebody—slipped and grabbed the branch," Ken said.

"There's another scar in the damp leaves—up there." Again Sandy pointed.

They moved toward it, and then slowly beyond it, their eyes searching the ground on both sides. Sandy, still in the lead, ducked under some low branches and once more came to a sudden stop. Just ahead of them was a great outcropping of stone, rearing upward in jagged setbacks to a height of nearly fifty feet.

Sandy waited for Ken and they approached it together, realizing as they neared the rocky ridge that it was not a cliff, reaching to a higher level, but a monu-mentlike pile of stone rising straight out of fairly flat ground. Slowly they moved to the right around it. It was roughly round in shape, and perhaps a hundred feet in diameter.

"The poor man's Gibraltar," Sandy said, but the seri-

THE RANDS FIND THE TRAIL 147

ousness of his voice contradicted the words' attempt at humor.

They had nearly completed a circuit of the rock when Ken noticed the patch of soft green grass at its foot. Wind currents had freakishly cleared the little patch of leaves and, in the middle of it, the grass was crushed by what appeared to be a footprint. The print faced a long vertical cleft in the pile of stone.

Ken's eyes traveled upward from the base of the cleft. Ages of weathering had split the huge rock from bottom to top, forcing the rough faces sometimes a foot, sometimes two or three feet apart.

Ken reached out and touched a small steplike protrusion of stone some feet above the ground. Across its surface was the whitish streak of a new scratch.

Scarcely a foot above that scratch Sandy found a similar one.

"Nails in his shoes," Sandy remarked, with an attempt at casualness.

They looked upward, and then at each other.

"Nobody would hide anything on top of a rock, would they?" Sandy asked.

Ken shook his head. "But there might be a marker there, a—" He looked at Sandy again.

"Anyway, if he climbed it, we can."

"Right."

Ken reached for the protrusion where he had first seen a scratch, got his right foot on it, and then slowly made his way upward. There were plenty of jagged edges for footholds—some of them scratched, some not—and it was but a matter of moments to reach the top.

Ken pulled himself erect on the almost tablelike sur-

148 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

face of the huge rock as Sandy hauled himself over the edge and joined him.

"There's your music," Ken said.

"And that's Cave Hill," Sandy told him.

Half a mile to the west a huge hill reared its tree-covered bulk skyward. The setting sun seemed balanced on its crest, and even as Sandy spoke, its lower rim disappeared. But it was toward the foot of the hill that their eyes were drawn.

There, on a broad stretch of level ground, stood a double row of tents and booths, decorated in bright colors and strung with signs and banners. Countless small black dots, no larger than ants from where the boys stood, moved back and forth in the lane between the garish structures. And it was apparent that the music, which the boys could now hear quite clearly, rose from the scene they were watching.

Ken had opened the binoculars case and was holding the glasses to his eyes.

"Twelfth—Annual—Carnival," he read slowly, focusing on the largest banner. "Benefit Kenshoa Park Fire Fighters."

A fresh breeze struck their faces, and with it came a barker's hoarse chant, amplified by loud-speakers: "Step right up, folks. Step right up!"

The sun was sinking rapidly. By the time Ken handed Sandy the glasses it was already half out of sight, and the carnival lights suddenly began to twinkle on. Just above them, girdling the foot of the hill, a dozen or more specially bright lights sprang into brilliance.

"That row of big lights," Sandy muttered, adjusting the glasses for himself, "illuminates the path that circles all the big caves—the ones I told you were equipped

THE RANDS FIND THE TRAIL 149

with lights, and open to the public. Most of the other caves are higher up and are hidden by trees. We couldn't see the entrances to them from here, even if—" He broke off as Ken got to his knees. "What're you do-

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ing?

"Working my fingers to the bone trying to prove our theory," Ken said, looking up from his careful scrutiny of the rock's roughened surface. At Sandy's perplexed stare, he went on, "A marker. Remember? If the curves of the snake don't lead to the money, maybe they lead to something that does lead to it—to some place up on Cave Hill maybe. Come on. Get down here and go to work."

"O.K." Sandy put the glasses back into their case and lowered himself to his knees. "But if you think we're really likely to find a nice neat arrow chiseled into—"

"Hah!" Ken sat back. "What do you think of this?"

Sandy moved closer to him, where Ken crouched at the western edge of the great rock. And then he whistled softly.

There were three small holes in the stone—shallow depressions that might have been formed by a lightly tapped center punch. They formed a straight line pointing toward Cave Hill.

Ken lay down flat on his stomach and rested his chin at the inner end of the row, looking in the direction the dots pointed. Then he took the binoculars from Sandy, held them to his eyes, and focused.

Sandy stepped over Ken's prone figure, sat down on his back, and bent forward to align the glasses for Ken so that they pointed precisely in line with the dots.

"I'll hold them steady," Sandy said. "You just look."

150 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

And a moment later, he added, "Well? What do you see?"

"I'm focused straight on a sign that says Enter Here."

Sandy groaned. "That's one of the explored caves. Don't you—? Here, you've moved them a little out of line." He adjusted the glasses again. "Now."

Ken's body suddenly jerked and Sandy almost toppled backward.

"Wow!" Ken said softly. "You'll never believe this. But I'm looking right at a big banner.

Kola—King of the Cobras, it says!"

"King of the—Cobras!"

"That's right. The banner's above a tent of some sort. Here—you look. Snake charmer, I guess."

They changed places hastily, and when Sandy lowered the glasses a moment later, he nodded.

"That's what it says, all right," he muttered. "But what connection would a snake charmer have with Fenton?"

"What I can't understand," Ken said, "is why Fenton should have arranged this elaborate scheme—the snake ring, the holes in the rock, and all—to lead him to anything as obvious as the King of the Cobras. Surely he could remember a name like Kala. You'd think all Fenton would have to do—if he wanted to see him— would be to walk right up to the carnival. Why this mystery—the route through the woods and all?" He shook his head. "On the other hand, how would he know the carnival would be here just when he wanted to get the money? Maybe we've gone completely wrong somehow. Maybe we've just imagined we were getting somewhere."

THE RANDES FIND THE TRAIL 151

"A cobra on Fenton's ring—and a cobra charmer at the end of the trail—you can't tell me we're not getting somewhere," Sandy said positively.

The barker's voice suddenly sounded clearly again. "Come on, folks! This is the last night of the carnival. Make it a good one!"

"All right," Ken said, "let's get over there and take a look around."

"Give me the glasses," Sandy said suddenly, in a taut voice.

Ken, about to put them into their case, looked at him curiously. Sandy was staring back over the eastern edge of the big rock, in the direction of the park's boundary along Route 17.

"Quick," Sandy added.

Ken put them into his hand. "What's up?"

"I just saw a car turn off Route 17—on what must be the snake trail." Sandy was focusing rapidly. "It had its headlights on. If I can catch sight of it again—if it's coming up the trail, and not just using it to turn around

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in—

"What kind of car?" Ken asked. But he knew what Sandy's answer was going to be before he heard it.

"The Rands' truck—Hiram's Hennerly." Sandy shifted the glasses slightly. "There it is! It'll reach the convertible in five minutes. Come on!"

CHAPTER XIV

DISCOVERED!

they slid rather than climbed down the narrow embrasure of the cleft in the rock. Sandy jumped the last ten feet, rolling over and away to give Ken room to land behind him. Then both of them raced around the huge granite mass to the point where they had first seen it, and dove into the woods.

Their feet slid recklessly over the sloping leaf-buried rocks. Branches slapped at their faces and caught in their hair. Sandy's jacket snagged once on a dead limb, but his two hundred pounds had too much momentum to stop. The leather ripped and Sandy kept going. Each of them fell

several times, and in the shadowy dusk under the trees Ken piled up on Sandy once. Shaken and bruised they hauled themselves erect again, not bothering to waste their breath on words, and plunged on downward.

When they burst through the last tangled barrier of weeds onto the little trail, they could already hear the small truck's laboring motor not far away.

Sandy vaulted over the door into the convertible, and
152

discovered! 153

had the engine running before Ken landed beside him. The car leaped forward, fought the hairpin turn, made it by inches and took the next rise like a rocket ship.

There was still some light in the sky, but the tree-bordered trail was already in almost complete darkness. Nevertheless Sandy preferred the dangers of an unseen road to the danger of giving themselves away to the Rands. He kept his lights off and hunched far over the wheel in an effort to penetrate the gloom, driving more by instinct than sight.

The trail was still climbing steadily. They turned another corner and another. Ken kneeled on the seat, clinging to its back, and watched for a telltale gleam behind them.

Finally he said, "I think you can use lights now. I haven't seen a sign of them—we must be way ahead."

Sandy snapped the powerful headlights on, and they both gasped when they saw how close their left wheel was to the edge of the gorge through which the stream tumbled, far below. Sandy inched the car toward the wall rising steeply above the road on the right.

"I was happier not knowing about that," he muttered.

Ken turned around and slumped into the seat, mopping at his wet forehead with a handkerchief.

"So was I." After a moment he added, in a more normal voice, "Wonder how they found out about the trail. We know they didn't follow us up here—and nobody knew where we were going."

"Except Dave Green," Sandy reminded him. "At least he could have guessed. And the Rands followed us to Green's house."

"That's right." Ken nodded. "And we didn't ask him

154 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

not to tell anybody what we were looking for. We underestimated the Rands again."

The convertible rounded one more turn and then rolled swiftly downhill. For the first time, through a break in the trees, they could see the glow of the carnival's lights not far ahead. Its public-address system—blaring music heavy with raucous brass—was audible now even over the roar of the car's motor.

"Take it easy," Ken cautioned. "We don't know where this road comes out."

Half a minute later they found themselves at the edge of a large parking lot crowded with cars. Just beyond the lot was the carnival itself.

Sandy slowed the car almost to a halt. Then he muttered, "Better not park right here," accelerated again and drove between two rows of close-packed vehicles until he was almost at the carnival end of the lot. A farm truck pulled out of a parking space just ahead of him, and Sandy quickly backed the convertible in.

"Let's watch for the Rands," Sandy said, killing the engine and the lights.

They walked to the front of the car, where they could peer down the lane they had just traversed. Several cars passed them, heading to or from the main entrance to the lot. But five minutes went by before a pair of headlights swung into the lot at the point where the trail joined it.

"There they are," Ken said quietly.

He and Sandy crouched down out of sight, but Ken craned his neck until he could keep his eye on the slowly approaching headlights.

Suddenly those lights swung right and disappeared.

discovered! 155

The Rands had turned into one of the cross lanes of the crowded parking area.

"Now all we have to do," Ken said resignedly, "is to find Fenton and prevent the Rands from finding us."

"That's right," Sandy agreed. "Nothing to it, really. Just a—" He broke off at the sound of voices.

But a moment later the boys exchanged brief grins. The lonely woods along the snake trail had made them react swiftly to the sound of any voice, but the ones they heard now were certainly harmless enough.

"I don't want to go home, Daddy!"

"Well, you're going home anyhow. And stop crying!"

"We've got to get used to civilization again," Sandy said. "If we're going to jump every time we hear a—"

But the screaming child being dragged past the convertible by an obviously irate father drowned out the rest of his sentence.

"I want to stay here, Daddy! I don't want to go home!" The sobs were muffled but not diminished by the grotesque clown's mask on the youngster's face. "I want to be a clown some more!"

"Well, you can be a clown at home. And this is the last carnival I'll take you to, if this is the way you're going to behave."

Down the lane somewhere a car door opened and slammed shut, and youthful wails rose in volume as a motor came to life.

The public-address system suddenly tripled its volume.

"All right, folks! Mardi Gras night—last night of the carnival! Let's all get into the spirit of Mardi Gras, folks! Get your masks! Everybody join the fun!"

156 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Well!" Ken's voice was suddenly alive with decision. "What are we waiting for? I mean—what am I waiting for? You stay here."

"What are you talking about?" Sandy demanded.

"Mardi Gras. Masks. Didn't you hear the man? Didn't you see the kid with the clown face on? But you stay right here. You're too conspicuous at the moment. I'll fix that. I'll fix both of us."

And Ken stepped out into the lane and began to trot toward the carnival grounds.

When he returned in five minutes he handed Sandy something. "That's yours." He reached in his pocket. "And here's mine."

Sandy cautiously unfolded the handful of cloth, and lifted it up to study it in the glow of light from the carnival.

"Hey!" he protested. "What's the idea?" The object in his hands was a complete donkey's head, with stiffened oversize ears. "Let me see yours."

Ken grinned as he slipped on his own mask—a few inches of black cloth designed to cover only the eyes and part of the nose. "Sorry, pardner," Ken said. "That was the best I could do for you. After all, is it my fault if you've got red hair and stand over six feet in your socks? This was the only thing I could find that would at least cover up all the hair. And if you crouch down a little—or walk on all fours, and bray once in a while—maybe the Rands won't notice you after all."

For a moment Sandy's face was as red as his hair. Then slowly he grinned. "All right. But don't think I believe you for a minute. Sometime in the quiet of Brentwood when we've got nothing better to do—" He pulled the cloth head down over his own, and the
discovered! 157

stiffened ears drooped ludicrously. "Sometime," Sandy's voice went on, behind the two huge rows of white cloth donkey's teeth, "you'll pay for this!"

"It'll be worth it," Ken assured him. "You look—no, I haven't got time to do you justice now. Come on. Let's head for Kala, the King of the Cobras."

"All right." Sandy's ripped jacket snagged on the convertible's radiator cap as he moved forward. "Wait a minute," he muttered. He pulled the jacket off, tossed it into the car, and felt around on the back seat until he found an old sport jacket to replace it. "O.K."

They started toward the rows of tents and booths.

"Let's hope the Rands haven't had your same bright idea," Sandy said. "I wouldn't want to stand alongside a masked figure that turned out to be Limpy, complete with gun."

"And let's hope we don't forget and yell each other's names out nice and clear."

The loud-speaker was still urging the crowd to enjoy itself, and the hundreds of men, women, and children filling the park lane were eagerly taking its advice. Masked and unmasked, young and old, they gathered in groups before the various concessions—the weight guesser, the wheels of chance, the fortuneteller, and the numerous booths where prizes could be won for skill at marksmanship or ball pitching. The food stands were all busy, and the air was rich with the smell of hot dogs and hamburgers, of popcorn and the huge spun-sugar cones that almost every small child brandished.

The barkers outside the various side shows shouted raucously, with a special last-night hoarseness, and

158 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

microphones amplified their voices until they nearly drowned out the strains of the noisy band playing in an open pavilion.

The closing night of the carnival was obviously a great success.

Ken and Sandy had covered nearly half the distance toward the tent of Kala, the King of the Cobras, when Ken caught his first sight of the Rands. They were in front of a hot-dog stand up ahead, their faces set and their eyes grimly studying everyone who passed. Beside them was the small man in blue denims who had bought the sandwiches that noon—the man the boys had come to call Hiram.

Ken nudged Sandy, indicated the three men with a jerk of his head, and then pulled Sandy into the protection of a noisy laughing group around one of the booths.

"Step right up, folks," the booth's barker was chanting. "Three balls for a dime—that's three balls, folks! Knock over the milk bottles and win a valuable prize!" He smiled his hearty false smile, caught sight of Sandy's masked head rising above the others, and focused his attention on him. "You look like a real sport, sir! Here you are—three balls. Only one dime!"

Sandy ducked his conspicuous donkey's ears as swiftly as he could, and backed away.

"I don't think they'll recognize us if we're not together," Ken whispered in his ear, when Sandy was free of the crowd's attention. "Let me go on first. You come in a minute. Meet you at Kala's tent."

Ken walked on slowly, at a leisurely zigzag that carried him from a booth on one side of the lane to one

discovered!

159

on the other. When he was some fifty feet away, Sandy started after him, pretending to look at the various booths but keeping a steady eye on Ken.

And when Ken was a scant twenty feet from where the Rands stood, Sandy caught his breath.

Ken had just stepped into the glow of a powerful floodlight aimed at the bandstand—and in its light there was clearly visible on the back of Ken's leather jacket the backward letters spelling out Hiram's Hennery. Apparently the jacket had not been cleaned as effectively as they thought earlier that day, and when the leather had dried again the paint that had soaked into it had risen to the surface.

Sandy lunged a few rapid paces forward, and then checked himself. He and Ken together might easily be recognized because of the difference in their height; anyone who had ever seen them together might not be fooled at all by their masks. And of course if the Rands didn't notice those letters—Ken would be out of the bright path of that light by the time he passed them.

Sandy wasn't running, but he was striding forward as quickly as he could without being conspicuous. If Ken were going to be recognized, he intended to be close enough to come to his aid.

Suddenly a half dozen small children, in the care of one frantic woman, barred Sandy's path. They were walking spread out, in a single line that stretched nearly across the lane, and the woman's orders to them mingled with her apologies to the crowd. Most of the passers-by were amused rather than annoyed, but Sandy almost shouted aloud when he saw that Ken

160 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

was already abreast of the Rands. He tried to edge around the children, but it was impossible. So instead he lifted one long leg and stepped entirely over the smallest child in the line. An angry howl of surprise roared at his back. Several people laughed. Sandy didn't even turn his head. He plowed steadily onward.

Already Ken was three or four paces beyond the Rands, walking with a careless air and apparently interested only in the booths. He was clearly oblivious of the dynamite he carried on his back.

Sandy watched the Rands. Limpy and his brother were intently studying two young men, not unlike Sandy and Ken as to height, and Sandy let out his breath in a sigh of relief. They hadn't noticed Ken after all!

And then Sandy saw the small blue-denimed figure beside them grab Limpy's arm and point straight at the leather jacket with its blurred letters. Instantly Limpy spoke briefly to his brother, and the three men moved out into the stream of people and headed straight toward Ken.

Sandy discarded caution and tore through the crowds until he was a scant ten feet behind the Rands. His mind was working furiously to devise some method to warn Ken that he was being followed, but nothing presented itself that wouldn't give away his own presence as well. And as long as the Rands had their eyes on only one of them, Sandy wanted to keep it that way.

Ken paused with a fine show of interest in front of the weight-guessing concession, but just as the Rands tried to elbow their way toward him he started forward
discovered! 161

again. And within twenty paces he had reached the last tent in the row—the tent of Kala, the snake charmer.

It was a garish crimson-draped affair, backed up against the first rise of Cave Hill, and the banner advertising Kala's abilities was spread flamboyantly twenty feet above it, stretched between two trees.

Ken reached the fringes of the crowd gathered around the platform in front of the tent, and then slipped into the heart of it. The Rands, behind, paused uncertainly at the edge of the group as if not quite sure what they intended to do next.

On the platform a small man in a Hindu costume was seated on the floor, a thin reedlike instrument to his lips. Before him was a large wicker basket, its hinged lid thrown back. And as the man began to play a high-pitched wailing tune, the basket began to rock slightly back and forth.

Slowly then, with a sinuous movement that was somehow as frightening as it was graceful, the hooded head of a cobra appeared above the basket's rim. It swayed in time with the strange music, lifting a fraction of an inch higher each time it moved back and forth.

The crowd was silent, held almost as fascinated as the snake.

And then the music stopped, the snake sank back, and the costumed figure dropped the lid in place.

Immediately a voice began to cajole the crowd. "Here you see only the briefest glimpse of Kala's miraculous powers, ladies and gentlemen. But inside—for the small price of twenty-five cents—you may witness to the full the remarkable abilities of this world-

162 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

famous snake charmer. The Great Kala ties knots in the most dangerous snakes in the world. He

lulls them to sleep with his music! Step inside, folks. See it all!"

Sandy, his eyes on Ken, heard the barker without looking at him. But suddenly Sandy's eyes swung toward the figure on the platform. There had been something about that voice—something vaguely familiar.

The tall swarthy-faced man wore a hat and twirled a cane. The slender mustache on his upper lip looked meticulously waxed. So far as Sandy knew he had never seen him before. And yet— And then Sandy saw it—the dark rectangular shape of a seal ring on the barker's finger! At this distance it was impossible to know for certain, but Sandy was convinced that the design on the seal was that of a coiled cobra.

The crowd had begun to shift, some entering the tent, some drifting away. And as the others moved, the Rands moved too. Suddenly, with Hiram between them, they formed a tight semicircle around Ken.

Sandy used his huge shoulders in a swift push forward. He was within a few feet of Limpy when he heard the rough voice speak.

"Holt!" it said. "We know you, Holt!"

CHAPTER XV

IN THE CAVE

"holt!" The rough voice rasped the word again, and Limpy's hand clamped heavily on Ken's shoulder.

Sandy acted on impulse. He shoved through the few people still separating him from the tight little group ahead, until he was directly in back of Ken. And then he said clearly, in a stage whisper loud enough for the Rands and Hiram to hear, "Ken! That's Fen ton —up there on the platform! See the ring?"

Instantaneously Limpy and Ted Rand and their small denim-clothed companion all swiveled their heads away from Ken toward the stage. And in another instant they moved toward it, elbowing their way forcibly through the crowd.

Ken was staring at the figure of the barker too, but only for a moment. Then he was jerked around by Sandy's strong arm, and Sandy led the way back through the fringes of the crowd, muttering excuses as he went.

"Were you kidding?" Ken demanded, as they stepped clear of the last of the onlookers and into the com-

163

164 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

parative freedom of the carnival street. "I didn't have time to see. And I was half-paralyzed, anyway, finding Limpy suddenly on top of me that way."

"I wasn't kidding." Sandy swung him around to look back toward the stage.

The Rands and Hiram had just thrust themselves into the front row of the crowd, right against the edge of the little platform. Their eyes were lifted toward the tall barker above them.

And as Ken looked, too, the barker glanced down and saw the newcomers. For an instant the glib patter faltered, and the eyes above the waxed mustache narrowed to angry slits. But almost immediately he recovered, smiled at the crowd over the Rands' heads, and picked up his speech again as smoothly as if nothing had happened.

"That's Fenton all right," Ken said slowly. "But why—?"

"Let's get moving," Sandy muttered, pulling at his arm. "I spilled a lot of fat in the fire back there."

Ken grinned briefly. "It was plenty hot as it was. I didn't believe you about Fenton at first, but I was sure glad to hear your voice."

They stepped around the corner of Kala's tent, into the littered little alley that separated it from its neighbor, the spun-sugar-cone concession.

"Shall we go look for Richards?" Sandy suggested.

"Only twenty-five cents, ladies and gentlemen," Fenton was chanting. "Kings have paid millions

for the privilege of watching the great Kala perform. You can see him here for the small sum of a quarter. Get your

IN THE CAVE

165

tickets now. The show starts in twenty minutes. Step right up and—"

"Twenty minutes," Ken repeated quietly. "That should give us time to do a little looking around. Come on." He started down the narrow alley away from the carnival street.

"Exactly what are we looking for?" Sandy demanded, following him.

"Information." Ken swung around the corner of the tent, with Sandy at his heels, and when they were behind it he began to explore the back wall of the canvas structure. Halfway along it he found a slit, put his eye to it, remembered he still had his mask on and whipped it off.

Sandy followed his example, sighing with relief as he crumpled up the donkey's head and thrust it into a pocket.

"I hope I don't need that again," he muttered.

"I don't think you will. I think we'll be reporters now for a change."

Ken had his eye to the slit, and Sandy looked through the same aperture higher up, above Ken's head.

They found themselves peering into the little auditorium where Kala performed. Directly in front of them was a small stage, decorated with shabby and faded draperies that were vaguely oriental in design. A dozen large lidded wicker baskets, similar to the one on the outdoor platform, occupied a considerable portion of the floor. There were no stagehands or other members of Kala's company in sight, and if an audience had begun to gather in the rows of seats beyond the

166 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

flimsy stage curtain, it was too shadowy to detect their presence.

"Nothing here," Ken said, turning away.

Some dozen feet behind the tent stood a rather battered trailer. Ragged curtains hung at its windows, and the lettering on the side repeated the words on the big banner above the tent: KALA—THE KING OF THE COBRAS. The door to the trailer stood slightly ajar under the light of a single dim electric bulb.

Ken hesitated a moment and then approached the door and knocked lightly.

"Yes? What is it?" The masculine voice that answered sounded thin and weak.

"Reporters, remember," Ken whispered to Sandy, pushing the door wide and stepping through. At one end of the trailer—the end at which they entered—was a tiny kitchen. In the center was a round table holding a few used plates and cups, and beyond it, filling the rest of the cramped space, were two bunks separated by a narrow aisle. A man lay on one of the bunks.

"What do you want?" he asked, peering at them. "Who are you?"

Ken moved toward him, motioning Sandy to follow. "We're reporters from the Brentwood Advance," he said. "Doing a big yarn about the carnival." He extended the new press card he'd made for himself.

"Reporters?" The sallow middle-aged face brightened. "Well, sit down. Sit down." He gestured toward the opposite bunk. "Sorry I'm not able to get up. I'm a little under the weather today. Have you talked to Joe yet—to Kala, I mean?"

' IN THE CAVE

167

"Not yet." Ken smiled. "Of course if you'd rather we talked to him—"

"No, no—not at all. Guess I can tell you pretty much anything you want to know." The invalid raised himself on one elbow. "Been barking for Kala for ten years, nearly. Hadn't missed a show all that time—until today. Name's Ansley Aikens." He paused. "Do you want me to spell that for you?"

Ken hastily pulled a folded sheaf of yellow copy paper out of his pocket and found a pencil.

"Yes, maybe you'd better, Mr. Aikens." He conscientiously took down the letters that were slowly repeated for him. "Good—thanks." Ken's voice was casual as he went on. "Then the new

fellow out front today isn't a permanent member of the company?"

"Him? I should say not." Aikens sank wearily back on his bunk. "Hope he's not too bad. I suppose we were lucky he came along just the day I got sick. Never happened before, you know—haven't missed a show in—"

Ken cut in firmly, one eye on his watch. Nearly ten of their twenty minutes was already gone. "Where'd he come from—the new man?"

Aikens shrugged. "Didn't say. Mentioned something about having been an old carny man himself years ago. Wandered by this morning and seemed to want to talk to me—old-timers have always got a lot of stories to tell, you know—and then he invited me to have lunch with him. I was feeling all right then. So he went out and got us some hamburgers and I fixed some coffee, and we sat in here and gabbed for quite a while. Then all of a sudden I took sick. Don't know what it could

168 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

have been. Never had anything hit me like that before." He shook his head weakly.

"Did you ask him to substitute for you in the show then?" Ken suggested.

"He offered himself. Said he didn't mind snakes. Lots of people can't take 'em, you know. But he'd been asking earlier—before I took sick—if he couldn't go up to the cave to see ours. So when—"

"You keep them in a cave?" Ken tried to conceal the excitement and impatience in his voice.

"In warm weather like this, it's a good place for 'em. And it's convenient—right out back here.

Anyway, as I started to say, Kala naturally didn't want to trust a greenhorn to take my place. You see, I'm an old-timer, like I said. Got a book of my press clippings down here somewhere—" He stretched his arm down under the bunk.

Ken got to his feet. "We'll come back later, if we can make it, to see the book, Mr. Aikens. But it's about time for the show to begin and we want to take a look from out front." He started for the door. "Thanks—"

"You've got five minutes yet," Aikens protested.

But Ken murmured something unintelligible and made his way outside. At the door he glanced back over his shoulder to say thanks again, and to make sure Sandy was right behind him. They jumped down from the step of the trailer almost simultaneously.

They weren't aware of the big figure looming against the shadowy tent wall until they heard the voice.

"The ash-can kids!" it said. "I'll show you a trick or two!" And then Limpy was coming toward them.

IN THE CAVE

169

"I wouldn't try to run," Limpy growled. "It wouldn't be healthy."

In the light of the feeble bulb over the trailer doorway they could see his right hand in his pocket, his left outstretched to grab.

Ken and Sandy stood perfectly still, shoulder to shoulder.

When Limpy was only three feet away from them, he lunged. And in the same instant the boys stepped apart, as if at a signal.

Limpy's weight carried him forward into the unexpected gap between them. His head was almost inside the open door of the trailer when two hard fists, backed by a total of three hundred and fifty pounds of well-conditioned muscle, sank wrist-deep into his solar plexus. Limpy made only a single sound—a cross between a grunt and a whoosh of air. Then he doubled over, his hands grasping his agonized midriff, and sank to his knees in front of the trailer doorway.

The boys didn't wait to see how rapidly he recovered.

With Ken in the lead they ran toward the hill rising up just behind Kala's tent. Not until they had climbed almost to the level of Kala's banner, strung high between the two trees, did they pause for a quick glance at the midway below.

The crowds there looked just as they had some minutes before, when the boys first left the group in front of Kala's platform, except that now there was a sizable queue in front of the ticket window for the snake charmer's act.

170 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"All right, folks! The greatest snake charmer of all time . . ."

Ken heaved a sigh of relief. Fenton was still performing his duties as barker.

"Come on," Ken said quietly. "Let's find that cave Fenton was so interested in."

Less than a dozen yards up the hill they saw the dark opening. It was directly behind Kala's banner—the banner Ken had focused on when he first sighted through the binoculars in line with the row of indentations on the big rock.

On a weather-beaten sign nailed to a stake directly in the center of the opening were the words: WARNING! STAY OUT! THIS CAVE IS DANGEROUS!!

The boys moved cautiously forward. When they were beside the warning, Ken risked his flashlight, thrusting the beam into the yawning blackness behind it.

The opening extended for some ten feet into the earth. How much deeper the cave itself went was impossible to determine, because at the end of those ten feet was a heavy timber barricade. It was a solid wall knee-high above the earth floor, and then continued upward to the arched rock ceiling in the form of wooden uprights and cross members spiked together in a grill-work whose largest opening was less than six inches square. A door had been incorporated into the barricade's center, but the rusty condition of its weighty padlock suggested that it would not be easy to open and that it had probably not been opened for years.

IN THE CAVE

171

Ken's flashlight explored the small roomlike area between the cave's mouth and the wooden barrier, standing with Sandy in the center of it and letting the light travel in a slow circle.

Evenly spaced around the walls were a dozen heavy wooden cases and several wicker baskets. Stenciled on the cases in red paint were the words: DANGER— SNAKES—KEEP AWAY, and the small holes drilled in each case were covered by a sturdy mesh screen.

"I never did like snakes," Sandy said between his teeth.

"I don't like them either," Ken said, "but those look closed up tight enough." The flashlight reached the halfway mark and illuminated again the barrier closing off the rest of the cave. "I—" He stopped, took a step toward the barrier, and then two more. "What do you know?" he whispered.

His hand grasped the rusty padlock, tugged at it—and the lock opened.

Sandy was beside him as Ken carefully unhooked the padlock from its hasps, and pushed at the heavy door. It opened inward, its hinges rasping.

For a moment they waited, their ears strained for the sound of anyone who might be within, and then they stepped over the solid section of the barricade into the inner part of the cave.

Ken carefully closed the door behind them, reaching through an opening in the grillwork to reinsert the padlock through the staples, and fix it as it had been when they first saw it—apparently locked.

Then he swung around and faced into the cave, sending the flashlight's beam ahead of them.

172 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Ten feet beyond the barricade the passage turned sharply to the right. On noiseless feet the boys reached the turn. Water oo/ing from the rocks glistened at them like secret eyes, and the air had a dead, dank quality.

They rounded the corner and Ken raised the light and pointed it ahead. Several paces beyond them the cave narrowed abruptly to a tunnel barely large enough to accommodate a body crawling on hands and knees. Loose rock on the floor offered mute testimony to the reason for the protective wooden barricade.

Ken let the finger of light illuminate the earth at their feet, and suddenly held it still at a clearly defined footprint. It pointed toward the tunnellike opening ahead.

"O.K." Sandy said quietly. "Let's go on through."

Ken thrust his head and the hand with the flashlight into the narrow space. "It widens out again right away." He crawled slowly through.

A moment later he held the light back for Sandy, and then they were both standing upright in a vast chamber, so high that the flashlight's beam was lost before it could find the ceiling.

The boys stood still, and Ken let the light travel methodically along the rough damp wall to the right.

Sandy grabbed the flashlight. "There—back a foot!"

At the spot where Sandy pointed there was a shelf-like niche in the wall, and in the niche was a rectangular object, heavily coated with rust.

The flashlight shook slightly in Sandy's hand. /

They were staring at a large metal cashbox. >/

CHAPTER XVI

TRAPPED!

sandy handed the flashlight back to Ken and moved forward slowly, as if he believed the box might disappear before he touched it.

Finally his fingers closed on the corners of the lid. He gave a gentle push and the box flew open.

Ken raised the beam of the flashlight another inch.

The box was empty.

In the deadly silence of the cave Ken could hear his own heartbeats. A moment before they had been rapid. Now they were slowing to a steady dull thump—thump—thump.

"Well," Sandy said finally, lowering the lid into place, "we certainly figured out where the money used to be."

Ken gave himself a shake. "Fenton's still here," he said firmly. "If he's got the money with him, it still isn't too late. Come on." He gestured with the flashlight back toward the entrance to the big chamber. "We ought to get hold of Richards right away."

They should have done that the moment they reached the parking area, he told himself angrily, as

173

174 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

he followed Sandy through the narrow opening and they headed toward the bend in the passageway.

Suddenly Sandy stopped still and reached out to cover the flashlight with his hand. Ken switched it off.

Immediately then he saw what Sandy had already become aware of—a faint glow beyond the turn. In the same instant Ken heard the voices—too quiet to be distinguishable, but loud enough to reverberate faintly against the cave walls.

They felt their way along the inner wall of the curve until they could peer cautiously around toward the wooden barricade.

"None of your tricks, Fenton." Limpy's voice was even raspier than it had been before the boys had knocked the wind out of him, but his big bulk still loomed menacingly large in the glow illuminating the front outer section of the cave.

Yet despite Limpy's size, it was clearly the slim quiet figure of Fenton which dominated the group the boys could see through the crisscrossed timbers.

"A trick?" Fenton said. "Why, Limpy, what an unpleasant idea." He spoke in a quiet, subdued tone, very like the one he had used to the boys when he had thanked them so gratefully for giving him a ride.

Ken's fists clenched. There was something particularly fiendish about a man who hid his real nature behind a manner that was almost diffident—almost pathetic.

Fenton turned to the blue-denimed figure the boy had first seen entering Andy's lunchroom. "It was nice of you to look me up, Dalzell. Frankly," he added, smiling faintly, "I didn't expect you

to find me."

trapped!

175

Ken's mind clicked. Dalzell was the name of the man who had been Fenton's cellmate in the penitentiary. Richards had mentioned him.

"That was once you outsmarted yourself, Fenton," Dalzell was saying, his small face grim.

"Those two boys pointed you out to us out there." His head jerked toward the cave opening.

"You see, once you put us on their trail—"

"Let's cut out the post-mortems and get to business," the usually silent Ted Rand cut in. "You said we were coming up here to talk."

"Ted's right." Dalzell nodded at him.

"Sure he's right," Limpy growled. "Where's the dough?"

Fenton turned slightly and studied him with an attitude of mild curiosity. "You don't really think I'll tell you—do you, Limpy?"

"You'll tell us." Ted Rand moved in on him. "We've wasted enough time on you already. If you'd listened to reason a couple of years ago, we'd all—"

Fenton's voice suddenly sharpened. "What have you done to rate a cut?"

Dalzell unexpectedly chuckled. "If that's all that's bothering you, I wouldn't worry about it, Fenton. I think you'll agree that our claim to the money is as good as yours."

Fenton smiled. "You know, I really missed you after you moved out of our mutual quarters.

You've got a real sense of humor, Dalzell. Unlike," he added, "those two apes of yours."

Ted Rand's hand flew inside his coat. "That's the last—!"

176 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Teuton's voice was no longer polite or amused. "Shut up." The command stopped Rand with his mouth hanging open. "Get your hands up—all of you." The flashlight in Fenton's left hand shifted slightly to show the gun that had suddenly appeared in his right.

Ted Rand closed his mouth and swallowed. His usual swagger returned. Without bothering to lift his hands he said, "You and your fake guns! Everybody knows—"

The stubby gun in Fenton's hand, its barrel fitted with a silencer, pointed at the ground just beside Ted Rand's feet. There was a sudden soft plop of sound. Dust spurted up from the earth floor of the cave and Ted Rand jumped, throwing his arms above his head in the same instant.

"That's better." Fenton looked around to make certain that Dalzell and Limpy had also obeyed his command, and motioned to them to stand closer together. "There—that's fine." He was using his bland, harmless-sounding voice again. "I don't always use fake guns, you see. You must learn to keep an open mind about things." He waited a moment. "Let's see—now I guess I'd better search you, hadn't I? Face the wall, all of you. That's right."

Still blinking at the suddenness of Fenton's momentary violence, the boys watched him deftly remove two automatics from the shoulder holsters worn by Ted and Limpy Rand. Then—his flashlight tucked under his arm—Fenton extended his hand toward Dalzell.

"Everybody knows I'm never armed," Dalzell protested.

trapped!

177

"That's right," Fenton agreed. "The way everybody knows I carry fake guns. These fictions are useful—with people stupid enough to be fooled by them." Then he laughed as he withdrew the small revolver from Dalzell's overall pocket, and hurled it out into the darkness together with the Rands' two guns.

He stepped back a few paces, considering. "Was there anything else we had to discuss?" he asked. "Oh, yes. What became of those two troublesome young men—Holt and Allen?"

"Those little—!" Limpy began, and stopped.

"Yes?" Fenton asked.

"Nothing," Limpy muttered. "But if I ever get my hands on them—!"

Ken grinned to himself for a brief instant. Evidently Limpy had not reported his second defeat at their hands.

"I'm afraid we did you the service of getting rid of them," Dalzell was saying. "When they saw us they took right off."

"Really? If that's the case I must remember to thank you sometime. But I'm not so sure. They may have taken off only as far as that insurance detective—the one who's been hanging around here for the past day or so. However, that doesn't matter now."

"Oh? You've given up your plan?" Dalzell's voice was taunting.

"What plan?" Fenton snapped.

"Plain as the nose on your face what you'd intended to do. Stick with the carnival and ride right out of town with it. How'd you persuade the regular barker to let you take over?"

178 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"He ate something that made him sick." Fenton motioned with his gun. "All right. Turn around now."

Dalzell's small face, framed by his upraised arms, gleamed in the light of the flash. "I'll bet something made him plenty sick—if it was something you fed him. You—!"

"Move over there," Fenton cut in, ignoring him. He pivoted the group around, so that he could keep his gun trained on them as he himself moved to the barricade. Without taking his eyes off the men he pulled the padlock off and opened the door. "All right," he said. "In there—all of you."

"Fenton!" Dalzell's voice rose angrily. "We came in here in good faith, to talk—"

"Good faith!" Fenton snorted. "Get in there, I said!"

The moment Fenton had turned toward the barricade Ken and Sandy had backed away from the corner where they had crouched motionless, watching the curious scene played out in the front of the cave. Now, in the length of passage from the corner to the tunnel, they stood undecided, scarcely daring to breathe. The slightest sound might betray them, the slightest move call attention to their presence.

But if the Rands and Dalzell rounded the bend . . .

They heard the barricade door slam shut. Limpy and Ted kept up a running fire of invectives, and Dalzell said, "Don't do anything you'll regret, Fenton! If we can't get out of here—"

"Oh, you can get out." Fenton sounded reassuring. "I'm afraid this padlock isn't very sturdy.

Limpy can smash it in a moment or two. In fact"—the rusty hinges let the door swing open again—"just so you won't be in
trapped! 179

too much of a hurry, 111 leave this in here with you. To keep Limpy busy a little longer." Once more the door clanged shut and this time the padlock clicked.

The last of Fenton's words were almost inaudible in a sudden burst of frenzied noise. Dalzell and Ted and Limpy all shouted, and their feet sounded noisily on the rock-scattered floor as they apparently backed away from the entrance. Fenton's mocking laughter echoed in the suddenly pitch-dark cave.

At the first indication that the three trapped men were coming in their direction, Ken and Sandy started back toward the small tunnel. The loud voices reverberated in their ears, and the blackness was so thick that it could almost be touched.

Their hands clasped tightly—so that if one fell the other could help him back to his feet—they moved as rapidly as possible along the wall. They knew how close the little tunnel was, but the distance seemed endless now.

"I'll get Fenton if it's the last thing I do!" Limpy's hoarse voice quivered with rage and terror.

"Take it easy!" Dalzell lashed out. "No sense losing our heads. Here. I've got a match."

The boys were creeping forward so silently that they could hear the faint scratch.

"There!" Dalzell caught his breath audibly. "But. I've only got two more! Either of you got any matches?"

"I've got a lighter." It was Ted who answered him.

"Good. Put it on."

The boys could sense rather than see a faint glimmer reflected by the damp walls, and tried to hasten their careful shuffling steps.

180 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Limpy! Stop!" Dalzell commanded. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Not back there." Limpy's voice, still quivering, seemed to be so near the turn in the passage that the boys felt certain they must be visible from where he stood. But he went on as if aware of nothing but his own panic, "You think I'm nuts? But sometimes caves have two entrances, don't they? Maybe this one has." The last words were even louder than the first; Limpy was still moving in their direction.

"He's right." Ted Rand was supporting his brother. "We can at least look, can't we? Anything's better than—!"

"All right. But be careful of that light. We may have a long way to go."

Ken's hand, moving along the wall of the cave, felt it curve inward. They had reached the place where the passage diminished to the small tunnel. He crouched, pulling Sandy down with him, and at the same time thrusting him slightly forward.

Sandy understood. He dropped Ken's hand and went cautiously ahead on hands and knees. Ken followed. Sharp rocks cut into his palms and bruised his legs. But in a moment he and Sandy were both back in the large chamber where they had found the empty cashbox.

They peered backward, seeing clearly now for the first time the flickering glow that was Ted Rand's lighter. The three men had rounded the corner and were moving slowly but steadily forward, their faces glimmering and contorted in the surrounding darkness.

hopped! 181

"If I could just get my hands around that skinny neck!" Limpy was muttering as he walked.

"Hurry up. Can't we go faster? You think that thing back there can't get us at this rate?"

Ken shut the steadily approaching voice out of his mind. He put his mouth close to Sandy's ear.

"Let 'em come in here," he breathed. "Stay against the wall. We'll kill their light first and then we'll go back out."

He could keep them penned up behind the narrow tunnel, he was thinking—stones hurled at the tunnel's mouth would accomplish that—while Sandy went ahead and smashed the padlock. He wondered why Limpy hadn't smashed the padlock, as even Fenton had admitted he could. What had Fenton done just before he went off, to create that sudden burst of shouts and—? There was no further time for speculation.

The Rands and Dalzell were almost in front of the tunnel. Ken and Sandy stepped to either side and flattened themselves against the wall.

Suddenly from the other side of the small passageway came a noisy rattle of stone, and the flickers of light gave way again to utter darkness.

"I dropped it!" Ted Rand's voice was both terrified and savage. "Light a match! Quick!"

"All right." Dalzell silenced him. "But I've only got two, remember, so don't waste any time. Get down on your knees, both of you—so you'll be ready." There was a scratch and then a flicker.

"It must be right here—somewhere."

Stones clattered.

"Watch out, you fool!" Dalzell's voice came out in a

182 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

grunt, as if one of the others had fallen against him.

An instant later the faint flicker had disappeared.

For a moment all three men shouted at once, blaming each other.

"Shut up—both of you!" Dalzell's voice finally topped the others authoritatively. "Stand up.

And stand still. Where are you?" He paused, as if he were groping for them in the dark. "All right. Now stay there. Don't move. Til find the lighter." The air in the cave seemed to quiver with the contempt in his voice.

The final match flared into life.

A breathless moment passed.

"All right," Dalzell said then. "I've got it."

A slightly brighter glow replaced the flicker-of the match.

"Follow me," Dalzell said.

Slowly the steps came closer, and then stopped, i

"What's the matter?" Limpy demanded.

"A cave-in, I guess," Dalzell reported. "But there's* a way through. Go ahead, Ted. You go first."

"Go first yourself. How do I know—?"

Dalzell laughed shortly. "A coward and a fool. All right. I'm going."

The exit of the little tunnel, between Ken and Sandy, was suddenly almost brightly illuminated.

They could hear Dalzell's heavy breathing. Each breath brought him closer.

And then the flame of the lighter emerged into the big chamber, thrust forward by Dalzell's bony hand.

Ken pressed his face against the rock wall and waited.

CHAPTER XVII

COBRA ON GUARD

dalzell got slowly to his feet, less than two paces from where Ken and Sandy stood on either side of him. With their backs turned they had to imagine his movements, had to guess how he was lifting the lighter high as he peered about.

Ken held his breath until the pulse was pounding in his forehead.

At the end of what seemed like an eternity, Dalzell spoke.

"Can't see a thing in here. Looks safe enough though. Come on."

Limpy came through first. Ken could hear his hoarse grunts and the sound of his wide shoulders scraping against the tunnel walls. Ted followed him more rapidly.

Cautiously all three took several steps away from the tunnel.

Ken's finger found the button on the flashlight, and he turned his head slightly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see, in the glow of the small flame, part

183

184 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

of Limpy's chin, the side of Ted's face, and Dalzell's hand holding the lighter. In the vast blackness of the cave the fragmentary shapes seemed inhuman and ghostly.

Ken forced himself to wait a little longer, until the three men were several steps farther from the entrance.

Then he swung around, thrust the flashlight forward and flicked it on.

Its beam barely reached them, but Dalzell and both the Rands stopped as if they had turned to stone. And before they could move again something dark hurtled through the air.

Sandy's shoulder caught Limpy in the back at the same moment that the hurled donkey's head doused the lighter in Dalzell's hand. Ken moved in with the flash.

The three men flew apart as if by magic. Limpy's bulk drove against Dalzell and sent the smaller figure flying out of the range of Ken's narrow beam. Limpy's arm, outthrust, came into jarring contact with Ted Rand. Ken applied the final touch, driving his own shoulder against Ted's back. Both brothers fell in a flailing heap of arms and legs.

Ken and Sandy stepped away, turned around. The finger of light leaped ahead of them across the dirt floor, found the tunnel entrance, and held it. Sandy almost dove through, and Ken was so close behind him that they emerged almost at the same instant.

Behind them, the cavern was filled with shouts and bellows of rage, amplified and distorted by the vastness of the chamber. Ken pointed the light ahead.

COBRA ON GUARD

185

"You tackle the padlock," he said, as they neared the turn in the passage. "I'll stay here and take care of them." He jerked his head back over his shoulder.

When they reached the corner, Ken flashed the light once down toward the barricade to make

sure it would reach that far, and then turned it back toward the tunnel.

Dalzell's small enraged face was already visible there, peering like a gnome through the jagged hole.

Ken groped on the floor for a small stone. "Keep back!" he shouted, and the stone flew forward like a bullet to shatter on the rocks ten feet wide of the hole. "That's a warning!" he called. "I can do better than that!"

The face vanished. "I'll turn the light down your way in a minute," Ken muttered to Sandy, picking up another stone. This one struck so close to the hole that splinters found their way inside. Dalzell let out a short furious yip of anger.

"I told you I could do better!" Ken called. Then swiftly he swung the flashlight around so that Sandy could see his way to the barricade. "Go to it," Ken said. "I'll hold the light on you all I can."

Sandy dashed forward, his shadow flying huge and grotesque ahead of him. It was the shadow that prevented him from seeing it—that blocked his realization of the danger until he was almost on top of the opened wicker basket standing just inside the barricade.

Mid-air, in a leap, Sandy tried to change his course and twisted to one side. An outcry, half-strangled in his throat, emerged as a strange croak. He came down

186 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

sideways against the barricade, arms flung wide, legs sprawling. One big hand jarred the basket and rocked it violently.

Before Sandy could move the venomous head appeared, hood distended, forked tongue darting between the open jaws.

The snake swayed gently from side to side, its eyes shining like evil jewels. And then its head rose higher, above a sinuous length that undulated with a deadly purposefulness.

Six inches from the basket Sandy's left leg jerked involuntarily.

Ken was already halfway down the length of the passage. Now he scuffled his feet noisily and shouted.

"Don't move!"

The snake swung around to face him. The tongue darted faster, the oscillating motions increased in rapidity.

Without taking his eyes from the reptile Ken groped at his feet for a stone. Groped—and found nothing.

Suddenly he wriggled out of his jacket, transferring the flashlight swiftly from one hand to the other, moving steadily forward.

When he was within two yards of the snake he began to wave the jacket before him, first slowly and then faster. Like a bullfighter he directed his adversary's attention left, right—left, right.

And then the snake struck. As its head flashed forward, Ken flipped the jacket to meet the attack. The leather bulged back toward him as the cobra's head hurled against it. Ken stepped swiftly sideways.

He could feel the snake recoil, its embedded fangs

COBRA ON GUARD 187

pulling the jacket with it. Ken leaped forward as it sank into the basket, stood over it as it lashed frantically back and forth, fighting to extricate itself from the heavy folds.

Ken made himself wait for the right moment. Then, with the hand that held the flashlight, he reached for the hinged lid standing erect against the barricade. His next two motions synchronized perfectly. He slammed down the lid, and at the same moment, dropped the jacket into the basket. With a final gesture he thrust home the hasp that held the lid tight.

As he straightened up he was already turning back into the cave. A second later he was again at the corner and pointing the light once more toward the tunnel.

Dalzell's head and shoulders were already through.

"Get back!" Ken warned, reaching for a stone.

Dalzell's head disappeared as the stone shattered itself against the wall, six inches from where he had been.

Ken turned the light back toward the barricade.

Sandy was on his feet, but his body was still rigid with the paralysis that had held him helpless under the darting fangs of the snake.

Ken put all his strength into the forcefulness of a command. "Smash the padlock!"

Sandy shook himself, lifted his head, looked down toward Ken. Life seemed slowly to come back into his face. He bent down then, picked up the basket, and carried it steadily to the side of the passage, out of the way.

Ken let out his breath with relief. Sandy was going to be all right. Ken flicked the light back down toward

188 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

the tunnel for an instant—the mouth of the hole was silent and empty—and then turned it full on the barricade.

Sandy had picked up a stone the size of a grapefruit and was maneuvering it through one of the grillwork openings. Once on the other side he held it firmly between hands thrust through adjoining spaces, and crashed it down on the padlock.

"One or two more blows like that," Ken thought—and felt something cut through the air and strike the wall beside his head.

Swiftly he turned the light away from Sandy and onto the tunnel opening, flinging a stone simultaneously at the same point. In the shadowy tunnel an arm came up to cover a face, there was a scrabbling sound, and the hole was once more deserted.

Ken dabbed absent-mindedly at his cheek, where the splinters of stone had struck it, and gave Sandy the light again. Immediately the redhead brought the rock down a second time, hard.

When it crashed against the padlock for the third time, Sandy said quietly, "O.K. That did it."

Ken sent a final small stone hurtling through the dark toward the tunnel before he ran to join Sandy at the barricade. Sandy had the door open. They both went through.

"We can't put the padlock back," Sandy said, gesturing toward broken bits of rusted metal as he swung the timber door into position.

"Doesn't matter. Making sure we're not still throwing rocks—and making sure the snake is out of the way—will hold them up a little. Come on." Already Ken

COBRA ON GUARD

189

was leading the way out of the cave and down the sloping path behind Kala's big sign. "You all right now?" He asked over his shoulder.

"Sure. Sorry I was such a—"

"Cut it out. I'd have frozen too, but I figured it was harmless—that its venom had been extracted. Anyway," he grinned briefly, "that's the theory I operated on."

At the rear of Kala's tent Ken paused long enough to put his eye once more to the slit in the rear wall.

"Didn't think he'd be there," he muttered, turning around again, "but we had to make sure."

"He's probably miles from here by now."

Ken had reached the door of the trailer. He knocked quickly and stuck his head inside before he heard an answer.

Aikens lifted his head from the pillow. "Ah!" He smiled. "Come back to see the book?"

"We're looking for your new barker, Mr. Aikens. Has he been in here recently—in the last twenty minutes?"

"Why, yes, he has. Why? You won't need to mention him in your story, will you? He—"

Ken cut in. "Did he have anything with him? Or did he pick up anything from here?"

"He was just carrying the snake basket." Aiken's pale sick face looked completely bewildered.

"Snake basket!" Ken laughed shortly. They should have thought of that, he told himself. What better place to hide the money—especially with a snake to guard it.

"I don't understand what you—" Aikens was saying.

Ken spoke rapidly. "We have to go now, Mr. Aikens. We'll try to explain all this some other time, but look—

190 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

your temporary barker probably fed you something to make you sick. Have you seen a doctor?"

"Fed me something? But I— No, I haven't."

"Well, please do. I know it sounds crazy, but you'll just have to take our word for it. Don't forget now. See a doctor!"

Ken backed out and shut the door before Aikens could reply, and dragged Sandy with him down the narrow passageway between Kala's tent and its neighbor.

As they reached the crowded midway they both stopped involuntarily. It seemed almost impossible that this gay brightly lighted spot, thronged with laughing people, could look exactly as it had looked half an hour before. So much had occurred in that brief period to Ken and Sandy. They had encountered so much danger and darkness and deadly viciousness that they could scarcely believe the rest of the world had remained unchanged.

Sandy blinked. "What now?" he asked. "Richards?"

Ken started forward, dodging the wildly waving spun-sugar cone in the hands of a delighted five-year-old. "There isn't time. We don't know where he is— we can't phone him. And Fenton's on his way." He was heading determinedly toward the parking lot.

A miniature cowboy, in full regalia, hurled himself against Sandy and it was a moment before the redhead could extricate himself from the clutching arms and join Ken again.

"In the station wagon, do you think?" Sandy asked, when he was close enough to make himself heard. "Would he risk it?"

COBRA ON GUARD

191

"Why not? The Rands didn't mention the old trail—they never got around to it. So Fenton doesn't know we know about it either—or about his car. And I suppose he thinks if Richards hasn't found the car by now, he never will."

"We're parked down here." Sandy guided them into the parking lot lane where the convertible stood. "He's got at least twenty minutes start—more nearly twenty-five," he went on. "And it would only take him about fifteen to run to his car. It's not more than a mile down the trail. We'll never catch up to him," he pointed out.

"Let me drive." Ken held out his hand for the keys. "I've got an idea."

As soon as he had the motor started and the car moving through the parking area to the entrance to the old lane, he began to talk again.

"Remember that switchback at about the middle of the trail? Did you see it on our way up?"

"I remember it." Sandy's voice sounded puzzled.

"Well, from the upper level of that it's possible to see clear to Route 17." Ken swung into the little trail and hung on to the wheel as the car bucked and twisted in the two deep ruts. "I figure Fenton reached his car about five minutes ago—and he's got three miles to go from there to the highway. The switchback's about a mile beyond his car—about two miles from here."

Sandy clutched the door. "I've stopped worrying about Fenton's gun," he muttered between his teeth. "Compared to the way you're driving—"

"We've got to make time." Ken pulled furiously around a bend. "If we can get to the switchback by the time he hits the highway, we'll be able to look

192 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

down and see which way he turns. And out on the highway we ought to be able to catch up to that jalopy without any trouble."

"If we can get to the switchback alive!" But a moment later Sandy sat forward, still gripping the door handle, and said, "I think it's right around the next turn that his car was parked."

"I know." Ken slowed down slightly. "I'm watching for it. If it's still there we'll keep right on going— fast!"

The convertible's long red hood swung around the next corner. Its headlights washed the bank with light and then pointed forward again.

"Look!"

Almost before Sandy spoke Ken jammed the brake to the floor.

Fenton's station wagon had been nosed out of its hiding place and stopped on the road, completely blocking the narrow trail. The convertible skidded to a halt not ten feet away from it. And in the same instant Fenton stepped out of the underbrush directly beside them, his gun in his hand.

"How nice," he said quietly. "How nice of you to come along just in time to give me another Lit."

CHAPTER XVIII OVER THE BRINK

the flashlight in Fenton's hand blinded them.

"Get out!" Fenton ordered. "On this side—both of you." He stepped back a pace to give them room, and when first Ken and then Sandy were standing on the trail between the car and himself he spoke again. "Someone seems to have tampered with the mechanism of my car. You, perhaps?" He waited a moment. "No, I guess not—but you're wishing you'd thought of it, aren't you? Must have been Dalzell and his friends. Now that I'm aware you all used this road, I see it could have been any of you."

"If you want us to give you a lift—" Ken began.

The light shifted just enough so that they could see his face. Fenton was smiling.

"But first we must get my old car out of the way, mustn't we?" His face hardened. "Get going, you two. Push it back off the trail."

The boys looked at each other briefly. Then, without a word, they moved toward the front of Fenton's battered station wagon, crouched with their backs to

193

194 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

its bumper, locked their hands on the metal and began to push. The car creaked laboriously, and moved a slow half foot.

"Hurry up!" Fenton ordered impatiently.

"The hand brake must be on," Sandy said.

"Take a look." Fenton swung the gun slightly. "But don't try anything—because this is aimed right at your friend here."

Sandy released the brake in tight-lipped silence, and returned to the front of the car. "Ready?"

"Ready," Ken muttered.

The soft earth clung stickily to the wheels. The boys' feet slipped. Ken went down on his knees. *

"Get up!" Fenton stood over him. "Get up!" f-r Ken staggered to his feet.

They put their weight against the front fenders this time, and Ken could feel his back muscles aching with the strain. The car rocked back and forth in the muddy hollow into which it had settled.

"I said to push that car back!" Fenton stepped closer, raised the gun for a single instant, and brought it down toward Sandy's head.

Sandy ducked and took the slanting blow on his upper arm.

Ken moved fast, but Fenton stepped swiftly back and had his weapon shifting between the two boys. It darted, Ken thought numbly, like the snake's tongue. Left, right—left, right.

"That was just a sample," Fenton said. "Maybe now you'll find a little more strength for this job."

"You all right?" Ken muttered to Sandy.

"Sure." Sandy rubbed his arm briefly. "Let's go."

OVER THE BRINK

195

The station wagon moved that time. Six inches on the first heave, a foot on the second.

"Keep going!" Fenton commanded.

The car rocked again then in the mud. But finally it moved backward one more foot, and then a second, and a third.

"All right," Fenton said. "That's enough. I'll be able to get your car through."

"You will!" Ken stared at him.

"That's right. I've decided not to put you two to the trouble of coming along with me. Bring those two canvas bags out of the station wagon," he ordered Ken.

Fenton kept the muzzle of the gun pointed directly at Sandy's midsection until Ken had brought the bags to him. "Put them in your car," he ordered.

Ken threw the bags into the convertible. "You're not going to get away with this, you know. There'll be an alarm out for this car before you've gone ten miles."

Fenton laughed. "I think not. Who'd give it? You? I've thought of a way to take care of that."

Sandy's eyes sought Ken's, saying plainly that he wanted to try to jump Fenton. Ken's signaled back just as plainly an emphatic no.

"No, I wouldn't if I were you," Fenton said, as if they had spoken aloud. "And now you'll both take off your belts, if you don't mind."

"Our belts?" Sandy echoed blankly.

But when Ken's hands moved to his own buckle and began to unfasten it, Sandy followed. For a moment he let the leather swing idly in his hand, the heavy buckle at its lower end.

"You!" Fenton pointed the light at the redhead.

196 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"Drop that—and get down on the ground. Over there. And you go with him," he added to Ken.

"Take his belt along."

The spot Fenton indicated with his flash was at the rear of the convertible. The boys walked stiffly in the beam of the light, and stopped when he called a halt in the lurid red glow of their own taillights. Fenton switched off his flash.

"All right," Fenton said to Sandy. He nodded toward the center of the trail. "Face down. And you," he ordered Ken, "tie him up with his belt. Drop your own."

Fenton moved close to superintend the operation. "Tie his hands together behind him.

Tightly—can't you pull it harder?" He prodded Ken in the back with his gun. "And now bring his feet back up and tie his ankles to his hands."

Ken could feel the sweat running down his forehead in the chilly night air. Sandy's belt was barely long enough to do the job that Fenton wanted; it was necessary to pull the leather so tight that it cut into Sandy's flesh. Ken's own flesh winced in sympathy. But Fenton's gun was aimed at Sandy's back now—and Fenton was a desperate man.

The tenseness in his voice when he said, "Hurry it— can't you?" proved that.

Finally Ken straightened. Sandy was tied helpless at his feet, right cheek pressed flat against the mud of the trail.

"All right," Fenton said. "Now hand me your belt and lie down there right behind your friend. You two will be company for each other until Dalzell and his boys come along."

OVER THE BRINK

197

In the back of his mind Ken had known what Fenton's plan was, but he hadn't really admitted it to himself until he heard the thin tight-lipped man speak the words. Fenton was going to ride off in the convertible, leaving them flat in the road to be run over by the black delivery truck. Or if not run over—if the truck stopped in time—to be taken along for later attention by the Rands.

"This isn't a dream," Sandy had said the night before. "This is a nightmare." Sandy had been right. And now the nightmare was moving toward its inevitable conclusion.

Fenton had outsmarted them at every turn, and Ken felt the fault was all his. Even a moment ago, when Sandy had wanted to jump Fenton, Ken had prevented him. And it might have worked. They should at least have tried. But now Sandy was lying in the road and—

"Get down!" Fenton snapped.

Ken realized he had been standing dully in the beam of light, not moving. Fenton gestured with the light.

It was too late now to do anything but obey. i Ken looked at Fenton—and then looked again. The man's eyes were narrowed curiously, there was an intent listening expression on his face.

And then Ken heard it too—the sound of a car's motor somewhere not too far off. For a second, somewhere above their heads, treetops glinted in the flash of headlights.

And suddenly Fenton was stepping backward toward the convertible. The gun was still aimed at Ken, but the distance between them was increasing every instant.

198 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Ken felt his heart give a great lurch.

Fenton opened the car door, half slid into the seat and started the motor, all without taking his eye or his gun sight off Ken. He was barely visible, there in the car, but Ken could see enough to know that Fenton was still watching him, still had him covered.

One second Fenton and the car were there, right in front of him. And the next second they were gone—roaring around the bend and out of sight.

Ken took one involuntary lunge forward. And then stopped and tore for Sandy's prone figure. His hands fumbled clumsily at the belt he had fastened only a few minutes before.

"We'll make it," he panted, tugging at the last loop.

The oncoming car was clearly audible now. It was perhaps half a dozen turns away in space, and a minute in time.

The belt slipped through the buckle and Ken helped Sandy to his feet.

"Where to?" Sandy asked. "Into the brush?"

For a split second Ken considered.

"Let's try the car," he said then. "Maybe there's still a chance—"

He was stumbling toward the station wagon as he spoke, with Sandy beside him.

If they could after all—somehow—stop Fenton—

Long seconds seemed to go by before they found the car and braced themselves against its back.

"Give it all we've got," Ken muttered, and together they thrust their full weight against it. "It's all downhill— If we can get it back on the road—" After that Ken saved his breath.

OVER THE BRINK 199

"Once more," Sandy groaned.

They were fighting sticky earth, fighting a dead weight, fighting worn bearings and soft tires. But slowly the car began to move forward, an inch at a time.

"Keep it going." Ken edged along the side, pulled open the door and wrenched at the wheel.

The front tires were on the road now. He turned them into the ruts.

And suddenly the car was really moving, feeling the pull of the downgrade.

Ken leaped in behind the wheel and in another instant Sandy tumbled in from the other side.

Very close behind them now another motor was roaring, another car was hurtling down the grade.

Ken nursed the wheel, trying to round the curve by keeping the car in the ruts.

"They're coming!" Sandy gasped.

And then the road was straightening out beneath them, the curve left behind. The grade grew steeper.

With one hand Ken fumbled at the strange dashboard, desperately seeking for the knob or button that controlled the lights. With the other he gripped the wheel. The car was racing downhill now, rocking from side to side like a runaway roller coaster.

Ken struck the right button. A pale yellow streak of light illuminated a bare twenty-five feet of road beyond the bouncing front end.

Ken grabbed the wheel with both hands and skidded around a hairpin turn, aware that for a split second his right rear wheel hung over emptiness. He braked slightly, depressed the clutch pedal and jammed the

200 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

gear shift lever into high. Then he let the clutch out, and the dead engine revolved, the generator pumping new life into the battery. The faint gleam of the one headlight grew noticeably brighter. "Any sign of them?" Ken was hunched over the wheel as if he were a part of it.

"We're losing them." Sandy swallowed with difficulty. "Nobody in his right mind would take this road at the speed you're—"

"Good," Ken said briefly. He pulled around another turn, yanked sharply to follow the trail around a projecting boulder. "I hope I can recognize the spot," he muttered, beginning to ride the brake lightly.

"What spot?" Sandy asked.

"The switchback," Ken said. "We're going to let this crate go over the cliff to block the road below."

"What?" Sandy almost shouted the word.

"Watch for a clump of birches on the right." Ken fought the wheel around another turn.

"Birch trees!" Sandy yelled.

Ken jammed the brakes on. "Get ready to jump," he said, as the old vehicle shuddered above the locked wheels.

They were jouncing at a slow ten miles per hour when Ken let go the brakes. At the next turn—fifty feet beyond—the headlights shot off in black space.

"When I say go" Ken said.

"Right."

Ken opened his own door wide, holding the wheel with one hand and fighting the pull of the ruts that were swinging in for the curve. Suddenly the front wheels jounced clear, headed for emptiness.

OVER THE BRINK 201

"Go!" Ken yelled. He saw Sandy's body shooting through the opposite door as he himself jumped clear.

Ken kept his feet, waving his arms to hold his balance, and watched Sandy tumble half over the bank, catch himself and claw his way back.

Just beyond Sandy the old station wagon hesitated on the brink for a long moment, the swath of illumination its headlight sent off into the night seeming to hang motionless. And then the front end dipped over the edge. The low brush that dotted the steep hillside was no obstacle for its weight. Its speed increased with each foot of descent.

Ken was beside Sandy in time to see it buck high in the air, slew around sideways, and turn over. Miraculously the lone headlight survived to light the last few yards of its final journey. The car landed on the trail below, where the switchback brought the road down and around to a spot directly below where the boys stood. Metal, wood, and glass crashed resoundingly. Then the car bounced high in the air once more before it settled down with a long sighing clatter, and the headlight died with the last convulsion.

The boys stood transfixed, the crash still echoing in their ears, even when there was nothing to see in the utter darkness below them.

But Ken came suddenly alive a moment later, grabbed Sandy's arm and leaped forward over the edge of the bank. They were still sliding and rolling downward, unable to break their headlong flight, when the spot where they had been standing was brightly illuminated by the sharp beams of the black truck's headlights.

202 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Ken finally caught at a small sapling, held on, and hauled Sandy to his feet beside him.

Up above them the black truck roared on around the curve.

And below, suddenly, the headlights of their own convertible rounded another corner and shone squarely on the tangled wreckage of the station wagon.

They could hear the convertible's locked wheels rip up earth as Fenton braked to a stop.

CHAPTER XIX
FIGHTING WITH FIRE

the tableau below them remained static for a brief instant—Fenton rigid at the wheel of the convertible, with the wreck barring his way in front and the black truck roaring at him from the rear.

Then Fenton leaped out of the car, a bag clutched under each arm. He dashed forward into the glare of the convertible's headlights, turned, trying to see the approaching truck, turned again and looked up toward the spot from which the station wagon had come. He seemed to be peering directly at the boys, where they clung to the hillside in the darkness some two hundred feet above him. He was like a cornered rat searching blindly for escape.

"Cut beyond him," Ken whispered, releasing his hold on the sapling. Together they let themselves slide down the hill, on an angle that would bring them out on the trail some distance beyond the wreck.

Immediately the stones dislodged by their flying feet clattered downward in miniature avalanches. A branch tore against Ken's face, another ripped at his clothing.

203

204 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

Holding his beltless trousers up with one hand and clearing his way with the other, Ken had time for a single glimpse of Fenton, still on the trail below.

Fenton had a gun in one hand now, and he was staring at the hillside trying to locate the source of the rattling stones. "I'll get you!" he screamed. There was a short spurt of fire from the gun. The bullet slapped viciously into the hillside fifty feet from where Ken and Sandy had stopped in their tracks.

Fenton fired again, closer this time.

Then suddenly he ran to the wreck of the station wagon, dropped his bags beside the trail, and threw himself at the mangled car as if he expected the force of his rage to move it.

Ken and Sandy started down once more.

They had gone scarcely a dozen feet, and Fenton was still shoving frenziedly at the wreck, when the delivery truck rounded the curve.

Its headlights illuminated the convertible, and the light truck swerved and bucked as its driver cut sharply toward the hillside. And then the car was climbing like a goat, its motor screaming. It went up and around the convertible, seemed to hang motionless in the air for an instant, its body almost parallel to the trail, then slipped sideways, lurched ahead, slipped again, and was past and back on the road.

Only then did the driver see the wreck a hundred feet ahead. Wheels locked, the truck skidded sideways, bucked into the air and came heavily down on its side.

Ken tore his glance away from it to look for Fenton. The man had recovered his bags, edged around the

FIGHTING WITH FIRE 205

wreck, and was half-running down the trail, looking awkwardly back over his shoulder as he went.

Almost simultaneously three figures emerged from the overturned truck. Dalzell ran forward until he could see over the wreck ahead.

Ken grabbed Sandy's arm. "Look—Dalzell must have had another gun in the car!"

Dalzell lifted his right hand. An automatic roared and flame shot out of the muzzle.

Fenton left the trail in a long leap, rolled over, and disappeared.

"I think I got him!" Dalzell yelled. "Go after him! Go down around and cut him off!" Obediently both the Rands tore into the brush.

From somewhere in the trees Fenton's revolver coughed. Metal clanged as the slug tore through the shattered station wagon.

Dalzell crouched low, aimed, and fired again.

Under cover of the shots and the crashing footsteps the boys had started downward again, shifting their course so that they aimed at a spot on the trail far beyond where Fenton had disappeared. They were moving more carefully now, aware that the slightest sound would make them a target for both sides, and proceeding by cautious dives from one bushy cover to the next.

Then Dalzell, his gun held menacingly before him, also left the trail and was swallowed up by the dark woods. Now the convertible's lights illuminated only a deserted stretch of road, and the wreckage of the two vehicles.

The boys stopped in their tracks, still a hundred feet

206 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

from the trail, and listened. Not a sound reached their ears.

Ken fumbled until he found a stone and threw it high, aiming for the woods beyond the spot where Fenton had disappeared. The missile ripped noisily through dry leaves.

There was an answering shot—a dull cough from a gun equipped with a silencer. It originated on the far side of the trail but directly below them. And the bullet slashed through the station wagon.

Ken's mind worked rapidly. Fenton was close to the trail, following along it in the shadow of the woods in the hope of outdistancing the Rands and Dalzell and then returning to the trail itself where he could make better time. And in that case—

Ken clutched Sandy's arm convulsively. A tiny finger of flame licked upward from what had once been Fenton's station wagon. Then, with a dull roar, a blast of red fire and smoke shot skyward from the wreck.

The darkness melted before the magnitude of the flame.

"Look!" Ken pointed.

Close to the trail, on its far side, Fenton was crouched behind a tree, his eyes fastened on the holocaust, his gun pointed toward it.

They saw his hand jerk as the revolver fired again, and he moved back another step to take cover behind a tree. Once more he repeated the maneuver, putting another ten feet between himself and the blazing wreck.

Ken started downward at a crashing run. It was no longer necessary to worry about noise. The roar of the

FIGHTING WITH FIRE

207

conflagration covered the sound of snapping twigs and rattling stones. Already their eyes were smarting from the acrid smoke of burning rubber and gasoline.

They maintained the long angle of their course, and when they reached the trail and dashed across it, under cover of the billowing smoke, they knew they were beyond any point Fenton could have reached in his cautious progress along the trail's edge.

Suddenly, fifty feet away—between them and the fire—they heard his gun again, and a rift in the smoke revealed his dim figure taking cover from Dalzell and the Rands by dodging behind a huge oak.

The boys stood still and waited in the protection of a clump of sumac. Fenton was running from one tree to another, stopping at each one for a swift backward glance. And each time he moved he came closer to the boys.

He was only twenty feet away when he stopped once more, raised his gun, pressed the trigger, and then stared at it. Nothing had happened. The gun was empty.

Fenton turned toward Ken and Sandy and broke into open flight.

They waited until he was almost on top of them and then they moved to block him.

Fenton couldn't stop—he couldn't turn. He raised his arm to swing the gun like a club.

Ken and Sandy hit him at the same time. Ken drove for the solar plexus and Sandy for the chin.

Fenton straightened up stiffly, and the canvas bags fell to the ground. Fenton dropped beside them.

From some distance behind Fenton, Dalzell's gun

208 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

roared and the bullet ripped through the foliage overhead.

"He's right there some place!" Dalzell shouted. "Spread out and get him!"

"Come on!" Ken picked up the two bags.

Sandy hauled Fenton's limp form upright and got him over one broad shoulder.

Ken led the way downhill, deeper into the brush and away from the trail.

Behind them there was another shot and then another. Dalzell was firing wildly into the trees.

Ken skirted a boulder, stumbling in the dark.

"Watch out." He turned to guide Sandy around it. "This'll do for a minute," he said. "You've got to rest."

Sandy dumped his burden on the ground. He was breathing hard. "But we can't stay here," he gasped.

Clearly through the trees they heard Limpy's bellow. "We'll never find him! Let's get out of here!"

"You fools!" Dalzell sounded frantic with rage and anger. "There's a hundred and fifty thousand dollars right around here some place—and you want to get out!"

For a moment the boys didn't identify the sound that immediately followed his shout. It was a thin sound, high and almost eerie.

Then Sandy gasped. "Sirens!" he whispered. "Fire engines!"

"Limpy! Ted! Where are you?" The panic in Dalzell's voice proved that he had heard it too.

"Here!"

"Wait for me!"

The siren's wail was clearly distinguishable now. But

FIGHTING WITH FIRE 209

for a moment it was almost lost in the sound of crashing, thudding footsteps and wild shouts.

Dalzell and the Rands were tearing downhill through the woods, away from the approaching engines, with the speed and noise of a herd of elephants in flight.

A second siren screamed from another direction. Engines were converging on the fire from both ends of the trail.

"We might as well go up and meet them." Ken felt suddenly shaky as he bent down to pick up the canvas bags. But just as he touched them he straightened again and pulled up his trousers instead.

"Here." Sandy's voice wavered slightly. "Fenton doesn't need his." He unbuckled and removed the belt from the figure of the unconscious man at his feet.

"Don't you want it?"

"It wouldn't fit me, anyway. As long as one of us looks respectable—"

Ken put it on and then stooped over to untie Fenton's necktie. "He doesn't need this, either," he said, handing it to Sandy. "And if you can't get a necktie around your middle, you'd better start dieting. I always said all that chocolate you ate . . ."

Sandy thrust the tie through his belt loops. "It fits perfectly," he said, with an attempt at dignity. He got Fenton over his shoulder in a single heave. "Shall we go?"

"With pleasure."

The red spotlights from two fire trucks were converging on the length of trail above them, and the sirens were loud and clear. Each tree and bush stood out against the brilliance, as dramatic as the scenery on a

210 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

well-lit stage. The snake trail and the woods around it were no longer sinister.

The big hand on the clock in the Advance office pointed to three. Ken's typewriter was running along at a furious pace under his powerful—if sometimes inaccurate—pounding. Pop stood at

his shoulder, with one eye on the clock.

Bert got up from his desk to take the last page he'd edited into the shop. Hank met him at the door with several long sheets of galley proofs.

"How much more?" he asked, giving Bert the proofs in exchange for the sheet of copy.

"One," Ken said. "Coming up." He ripped the paper out of his machine, thrust it toward Bert, and slumped in his chair. "Whew!" he said.

"About time," Hank muttered, as Bert sat down to edit the end of the story. "You'd think we were running a monthly magazine around here—the way everybody takes their time. Ripped out the front page two hours ago and still haven't got all the new copy for the new

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one.

"Yes, you have. Here's the last of it." Bert handed him the hastily edited final page.

"And get a move on," Pop told him.

"Get a move on! Why, you—1" Then Hank saw them all grinning and stopped to grin himself.

"O.K. Now if we just had the engravings. Your layout calls for four pictures."

The front door opened and Sandy erupted into the office as if on cue. He handed a small package to Hank

FIGHTING WITH FERE

211

and set a large paper sack down on his desk. "Coffee and hamburgers for everybody," he announced. "Sam is a very irritated engraver," he added, reaching into the bag himself. "Wants to know why we always have to work in the middle of the night."

Hank tucked the engravings under one arm so that he could take his container of coffee and his paper-wrapped hamburger. "Tell him it's a question I often ask myself," he said, and disappeared into the shop.

The phone rang. Pop swallowed the first bite of his hamburger and scooped it up. "Brentwood Advance. . . Oh, Granger." He listened a minute. "Take it easy, son—or you'll bust a gasket. Messenger left here with the prints for Global News an hour ago. . . No—you've got everything we've got. . . They did? No, we didn't know that. Thanks."

He dropped the phone back in place and turned to Ken. "Got an addition for you. The park police picked up Dalzell and the Rands."

"I'll take care of it." Bert slipped a sheet of paper into his machine.

Ken saluted him wearily. "Thanks. I don't think I could type another word."

"Least I could do," Bert said. "After all the cracks I made about your detecting ability."

"You were absolutely right," Ken assured him. "We were certainly a couple of dopes most of the way."

"Now wait," Sandy protested around a mouthful.

"Dumb luck," Pop said. "That's what it was." He grinned at them. "No cunning. No cunning at all."

"That's gratitude." Sandy glared over the rim of his

212 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

coffee container. "We give you a scoop, a dozen magnificent—if I say so myself—pictures. And what do we get?"

"Five thousand dollars," a new voice said.

They all looked up to see Richards coming through the gate in the railing at the front of the office.

"Hah!" Sandy handed him a container of hot coffee. "Somebody appreciates us."

"Security Indemnity appreciates you very much indeed." The detective took a swallow and sighed. "That hits the spot," he murmured. "Just stopped by on my way to New York to tell you they got Dalzell and the Rands."

Pop nodded. "We heard about it from Global News."

Richards looked from Ken to Sandy and smiled. "Guess there's nothing I can tell you about this

case— except thanks." He finished the coffee. "If it hadn't been for you two—" He shook his head. "Who'd ever have looked for Fenton with that carnival? And if you hadn't smoked him out, he'd have gotten the money right past our noses under the false bottom of a cobra basket—with a cobra on guard." He shook his head in reluctant admiration. "Fenton could certainly think fast. He finds a carnival tent planted right in front of his hideaway and immediately figures out how to make use of it."

"He could certainly think far ahead too," Ken added. "Anybody who would go to the trouble of having a ring engraved, months before he actually stole the money— In a way I still can't believe he was actually caught."

Richards stood up. "Maybe you'll find it easier to

FIGHTING WITH FIRE 213

believe once you've actually got that check. How do you want it made out, by the way?"

"You weren't kidding about it?" Sandy asked. And when Richards shook his head, he added, "Brentwood Hospital Fund, I guess. Right, Ken?"

Ken avoided Pop's pleased and startled glance, crossed the room rapidly, and whispered in Sandy's ear.

Sandy's face broke into a wide grin. "Make it out to Ken Holt and Sandy Allen," he told Richards.

"It'll go to the hospital fund eventually," Ken explained, still avoiding Pop's eye. "But we thought we'd turn it over at some sort of ceremony—give Pop's committee some publicity, and maybe stimulate some other contributions."

Richards looked earnestly at Pop Allen. "They're a couple of great kids," he said.

"Oh, sure," Pop said. But his good-byes to Richards were absent-minded, and when the detective had left he looked narrowly at the boys. "Never look a gift horse in the mouth, it says, but it didn't say anything about a couple of stubborn mules. Mind you—I appreciate this gesture. But I've got a kind of feeling you two are plotting something."

"We are," Ken assured him, grinning. "With cunning."

"With low cunning," Sandy corrected.

Bert paused on his way to the shop. "I suspect that a ceremony will call for the wearing of your new suit, Pop."

"Why, you—you snakes in the grass!" Pop exploded.

"Not that," Sandy begged. "Call us anything but snakes."

214 THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

"You hounds then! That's what you are. Low sneaky—" Pop stopped suddenly, his features relaxing into a pleased smile. "You know, I think there's going to be another dog show next week. How'd you like—?"

Ken and Sandy groaned in unison.

"Please, Pop," Ken pleaded. "Dog show assignments lead to trouble—for us, anyway."

Pop snorted. "You two can find trouble without assignments."

Pop Allen was right. Ken and Sandy weren't on an assignment when they started the dangerous search for The Secret of Hangman's Inn.

THE END

The Clue of the Coiled Cobra

by Bruce Campbell

Ken Holt no. 5